N. NOSOV



SCHOOLBOYS

SOVIET LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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NIKOLAI NOSOV

SCHOOLBOYS

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Chapter One

SN'T it awful, the way time flies! The summer holidays simply flashed by and before I knew where I was, there was school starting up again. But I had great fun while they lasted, running about all over the place and playing football, and never thinking about lessons or books. At least not school-books, though I read plenty of adventure stories. But catch me reading a Russian grammar, let alone an arithmetic book! Anyhow, I had nothing to worry about with my Russian; I always got

good marks in that. But arithmetic is another story. I never liked it, and I was so bad at it that Olga Nikolayevna nearly gave me some holiday sums—holiday sums!—to do. But she took pity on me and let me pass into the Fourth—you know, the class or the form you should be in in your fourth year at school when you're a fellow going on for eleven like me. "I don't want to spoil your summer," she said. "I'll pass you this time, but you must promise to work at your arithmetic during the holidays."

Of course I promised, but as soon as school was over, I clean forgot all about arithmetic, and most likely I would never have remembered it if the term hadn't come around again. I felt ashamed of myself for not keeping my promise, but it was too late to do anything about it.

And so the summer holidays were over, and one fine morning, September the first, I got up earlier than usual, put my school-books in my satchel and set out for school. That morning there was a feeling of excitement in the air, as

they say in books. The streets were full of boys and girls, big and small, hurrying to school. Some walked by themselves, some in pairs and some in bunches. Some of them walked slowly, like I did; others tore along as if there was a fire somewhere. The little ones carried flowers for the class-rooms. The girls squealed, just like girls. But some of the boys squealed, too, and laughed. Everybody seemed very excited. I was excited, too. I was looking forward to seeing my Pioneer group, and all the boys from my class, and our Pioneer Leader Volodya who worked with us last year. I felt like a traveller coming back to his home and friends after a long, long voyage.

Just the same I was not altogether happy because I knew that Fedya Rybkin wouldn't be there with the others. Fedya was my best chum. We had shared one of the double desks in class. And now he had gone off with his father and mother to another town, and I didn't know whether I'd ever see him again. Another thing that made me feel sad was that

I didn't know what I would say if Olga Nikolayevna asked me about my arithmetic. Blast arithmetic! I had been feeling so fine about school because, after all, I had missed it quite a lot and now everything was spoiled.

The sun was as bright as in summer, but a chilly wind tore the yellow leaves from the branches, whirled them in the air and dropped them on to the ground. The wind chased them along the pavement so that they seemed to be hurrying somewhere, too.

From the distance I saw a big red poster over the entrance. It had flowers all round it, and on it in big white letters were the words: "Welcome to School!"

There had been a sign just like it at the beginning of last term, and the term before that. It reminded me of my very first day at school. I was just a kid then, of course. I thought of that first year and how much we had all longed to grow up quickly and become Pioneers. I remembered our first Pioneer rally, the solemn vow we had taken, and how Asya

Georgievna, our senior Pioneer Leader, had given us our red ties and we had become real honest-to-goodness Young Pioneers.

When I remembered all that, I felt all warm and tickly inside, the way you feel when something wonderful happens. My feet began to move faster all by themselves, and it was all I could do to keep from running. But it would never do for me to run like one of those babies in the First. After all I'm a Fourther now!

The playground was jammed. Each class was standing in a group by itself. I soon found mine. The boys gave a wild whoop when they saw me, and came running to meet me, slapping me hard on the back. I never thought they would all be so pleased to see me.

"Where's Fedya Rybkin?" asked Grisha Vasilyev.

"That's right, where's old Fedya?" the boys shouted. "You were always together. What've you done with him?"

"Fedya's gone," I replied. "He won't be coming to school any more."

"Why?"

"He's gone away to another town with his parents."

"Whatever for?"

"He's gone, and that's all!"

"You're fibbing!" said Alik Sorokin.

"I am not!"

The boys looked at me and grinned. They thought I was pulling their legs.

"Vanya Pakhomov isn't here either," said Lenya Astafyev. "Neither's Seryozha Bukatin!" the others cried. "Perhaps they've gone away, too, and we don't know anything about it," said Tolya Dyozhkin.

Just then the gate opened, and who should appear but Vanya Pakhomov.

"Hurrah!" we yelled. And we all ran to meet Vanya and pounced on him.

"Hey, let me go!" he shouted, trying to get away. "Haven't you ever seen a fellow before?"

But we all wanted to slap him on the back. I wanted to slap him on the back, too, but I hit

him on the head instead by mistake. Vanya got angry.

"Want a fight, do you!" he yelled and began struggling with all his might to get away. But we wouldn't let him go. I don't know what would have happened if Seryozha Bukatin hadn't turned up at this moment. The minute we saw him, we left Vanya and jumped on him.

"Well, now we're all here," said Zhenya Komarov.

"Not counting Fedya Rybkin," said Igor Grachyov.

"How can we count him if he's gone away?"

"But perhaps it isn't true. We'll ask Olga Nikolayevna."

"It's the truth, and I don't care whether you believe it or not!" I said.

Then we all began looking one another over and telling how we had spent the summer. Some had gone to Pioneer camps, others had stayed in the country with their parents. We had all grown taller and were quite sunburnt. But nobody was as sunburnt as Gleb

Skameikin. He looked as if he had been roasted over a bonfire. And his eyebrows looked so funny and white by contrast.

"How did you manage to get so brown?" Tolya Dyozhkin asked him. "Must have been in camp all summer?"

"No. I only spent a few weeks in camp, and after that I went to the Crimea."

"The Crimea?"

"Yes, Dad's factory sent .him to a holiday home there, and he took Mummy and me along."

"So you've been to the Crimea?"

"Uh-huh."

"And you've seen the sea?"

"Oh, yes. The sea and everything."

The boys crowded around Gleb and stared at him as if he were something remarkable.

"Come on, tell us all about the sea," Seryozha Bukatin said.

"It's . . . it's awfully big," began Gleb. "So big that if you stand on one shore, you can't even see the opposite shore. On one side there's the

shore and on the other side there's nothing, just water. You wouldn't believe there was that much water in the world! And the sun down there is so hot it took all my skin off."

"What a whopper!"

"Honest! I was a bit frightened myself at first, but it turned out I had another skin underneath. And now I'm going about in my other skin."

"Never mind your silly skin, tell us about the sea!"

"In a minute. . . . The sea . . . oh, it's simply tremendous! And there's heaps and heaps of water in it! A whole sea of water!"

I don't know what else Gleb Skameikin might have told us about the sea, but just' then Volodya came over. You ought to have heard the shout that went up! We crowded round him, all talking at once. We wanted to know whether he was going to be our Pioneer Leader again this year or whether we'd get someone else.

"Now, you know very well I wouldn't turn you over to anyone else. We'll go on working together as we did last year. Unless you fellows are tired of me and would like a change?" Volodya said, laughing.

"Tired of you? We'll never get tired of you. We always have such a lot of fun with you!"

Volodya told us that he and his friends had taken a trip down the river in a rubber boat. Then he said he would be seeing us later and went over to his own classmates. He wanted to talk to his friends just as we did.

We were sorry to see him go, but just then Olga Nikolayevna came over. We were all very glad to see her.

"Good morning, Olga Nikolayevna!" we chorused.

"Good morning, boys!" she answered with a smile. "Well, have you all had a nice summer?"

"Wonderful, Olga Nikolayevna!"

"Had a good rest?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Are you tired of resting?"

"Yes, we are, Olga Nikolayevna. We want to do some lessons for a change."

"That's fine!"

"I'm absolutely exhausted from resting. One more day of it and I'd collapse altogether," said Alik Sorokin.

"Well, Alik, I see you're just the same, as full of fun as ever."

"I'm just the same, only a little taller, Olga Nikolayevna."

"Quite a bit taller, I would say!" said Olga Nikolayevna, laughing.

"Not much smarter though," Yura Kasatkin put in. We all roared at that.

"Olga Nikolayevna, Fedya Rybkin isn't coming to school any more," said Dima Balakirev.

"Yes, I know. He's gone to Moscow with his parents."

"Olga Nikolayevna, Gleb Skameikin's been to the Crimea and seen the sea."

"How nice! When we have composition Gleb can write about the sea."

"Olga Nikolayevna, his skin all came off."

"Whose skin?"

"Gleb's."

"Oh! Well, we'll talk about all that afterwards. And now line up and get ready to march into class."

We lined up and so did all the other classes. Igor Alexandrovich, the Director, came out and welcomed us back to school and wished us success in our studies. Then the teachers led all the pupils in by classes. First the very smallest ones, then the Seconds, then the Thirds. We came next and after us the older ones.

Olga Nikolayevna led the way into our classroom. We decided to take the same desks as we had last term, and so I was left all by myself with nobody in the other half of my desk. At first we all thought the room was smaller than last year's, but Olga Nikolayevna explained that it only seemed smaller to us because we had grown bigger.

She was right. I went specially to one of the Third-class rooms during the break and it was exactly the same size as ours.

Olga Nikolayevna told us that now we had passed into the Fourth we would have to work much harder than before, because we had a lot of new subjects. Besides Russian, arithmetic and the other subjects we had last year, there would be geography, history and nature study. That meant we would have to start to work in earnest from the beginning so as not to lag behind. We copied down the new time-table, and Olga Nikolayevna told us to elect a monitor and assistant monitor.

"Gleb Skameikin for monitor! Gleb Skameikin!" the boys shouted.

"Quiet, boys. You mustn't make so much noise. Don't you know how to conduct elections? Anyone who wants to speak must raise his hand."

After that we held our elections properly. Gleb Skameikin was elected monitor, and Shura Malikov, assistant monitor.

At the second lesson Olga Nikolayevna told us that we would begin by reviewing what we had learned last term so that she could see how much we had forgotten during the holidays. She started reviewing right off, and it turned out that I had even forgotten my multiplication tables. Not all of them, of course, but just the tail-end. I could remember quite well that seven times seven made forty-nine, but after that I got all mixed up.

"Well, Maleyev" (that's me), "I see that you didn't even look into your books all summer," said Olga Nikolayevna.

Olga Nikolayevna always calls me by my second name when she is angry. At other times she calls me Vitya.

I've noticed that for some reason it is much harder to study at the beginning of the term. The lessons drag on as if someone was stretching them out on purpose. If I were the chief of all schools, I wouldn't let studies begin all at once, I would give the pupils a chance to get used gradually to the idea of studying

instead of playing. For example, one lesson a day would be enough for the first week, two lessons, the second week, three lessons, the third, and so on. Or else you could have only the easiest lessons the first week, like gym, in the second week you could add singing, in the third, Russian, and so on until you got to arithmetic. Now, I don't want anybody to get the idea that I'm lazy and that I don't like school in general, because that isn't true. I like school very much, but after playing games and doing whatever you like all summer it's hard to pull up suddenly and start doing lessons.

The third lesson was geography. I had always thought geography was some awfully hard subject like arithmetic, but it turned out to be quite easy. Geography is the science of the Earth; it tells you all about the mountains and the rivers, the seas and the oceans. Olga Nikolayevna said that the Earth is round like a ball. I had heard that before but I thought it was a yarn; I always thought the Earth was flat like a pancake. But it turns out that I was

wrong. Science has proved that the Earth is a great big ball and that people live on all sides of it. That's because the Earth draws everything to it, human beings and animals and everything on it, and that's why the people who live underneath don't fall off. And here's something else—the people who live underneath walk upside down, only they don't know they're walking upside down, they think they're walking right side up. If they bend down and look under their feet, they can see the earth they stand on; and if they look up, they can see the sky. That's why they think they are walking right side up.

We livened up quite a bit at the geography lesson, and at the next lesson something interesting happened. The bell had already rung and Olga Nikolayevna had come in, when suddenly the door opened and a boy came in. He stood by the door for a few moments wondering what to do, then he nodded to Olga Nikolayevna and said:

"Good day!"

"Good day," answered Olga Nikolayevna. "What do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Why did you come in if you don't want anything?"

"I've come to study. This is the Fourth, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"That's what I thought."

"You must be the new boy?"

"Yes."

Olga Nikolayevna looked into her register.

"Is your name Shishkin?"

"That's right. Kostya Shishkin."

"Why are you so late, Kostya Shishkin? Don't you know that school begins in the morning?"

"I came in the morning. Only I was late for the first lesson."

"The first lesson? But this is already the fourth lesson. Where have you been the last two hours?"

"In the Fifth."

"Now what were you doing in the Fifth?"

"Well, when I came to school, I heard the bell and saw a crowd of fellows hurrying into class, so I went with them. It turned out to be a Fifth class. During the break they asked me if I was a new boy and I said I was. They didn't say anything else, and so I didn't know I'd got into the wrong class until later."

"Well, sit down and try not to get into the wrong class any more," said Olga Nikolayevna.

Shishkin came over to my desk and sat down beside me, because the seat next to me was empty. All through the lesson the boys kept looking at him and snickering. But he didn't take any notice of them. He acted as if nothing had happened. He had a funny face. His lower lip stuck out and his nose pointed up into the air, which gave him a sort of scornful, stuck-up look.

When the lesson was over, the boys crowded round him.

"How did you happen to get into the Fifth class? Didn't the teacher call the roll?" Slava

Vedernikov asked him. "Perhaps she did at the first lesson, but, you see, I didn't get there until the second lesson."

"But how is it she didn't notice you at the second lesson?"

"Because there was a different teacher," Shishkin answered. "The Fifth isn't like the Fourth. They have a different teacher for every lesson, and until the teacher knows all the boys there's bound to be a mix-up."

"There's never been any mix-up with anyone else," said Gleb Skameikin. "Every pupil's supposed to know what class he's to go to."

"But what if he's a new boy?" said Shishkin.

"A new boy oughtn't to turn up late. You've got a tongue in your head, haven't you? Why didn't you ask?"

"There wasn't any time. I saw the fellows running in, so I ran in after them."

"You could have got yourself into the Tenth that way!"

Shishkin grinned. "I'm not that daft," he said. "The Tenth boys are all much bigger than me."

I took my books and went out. Outside, in the corridor, I met Olga Nikolayevna.

"Well, Vitya, do you intend to work harder this year?" she asked me. "You really must, you know. You will have to pay special attention to your arithmetic. It was your weakest subject last year, too. And you should be ashamed of yourself, not knowing the multiplication tables. Why, even the little ones in the Second class know them."

"I've only forgotten them a little at the end!"

"You must know your multiplication tables thoroughly from beginning to end. Otherwise you won't get on at all in the Fourth. Now see that you learn them properly by tomorrow."

Chapter Two



LL GIRLS think they're clever. I can't understand why they give themselves such airs. Take my little sister Lika. Just because she's in the Third now she thinks she needn't obey me any more. Anyone would think I wasn't her elder brother and hadn't any authority. How many times have I told her not to do her lessons as soon as she comes home from school. It's not good for you. Everybody knows that. Your brain gets tired after a whole day in school, and you have to give it a rest for an hour or two before doing

your homework. But talking to Lika is like talking to the wall.

When I came home that day there she was with her school-books spread out on the table, doing her lessons.

"Now look here, young lady!" I said. "What do you think you're doing? Don't you know you must give your brain a rest after school?" "Yes," she says. "I know that. But I can't help it, Vitya. I like to get my homework finished so as to be free to do what I like afterwards."

"You silly!" I went on. "Must we go over all that again? Why don't you ever do what your elders tell you? All right, it won't be my fault if you grow up to be a blockhead."

"But don't you see, Vitya, I can't rest until my homework is done," she said.

"There's no such thing as 'can't,' " I told her. "You must learn to rest first and do your lessons later on."

"No. I'd much rather do them first and rest afterwards. Besides, our homework is easy. Not like yours."

"No, I daresay it isn't," I said. "Wait till you get into the Fourth, you'll see how tough it is then."

"What homework have you got today?" she asked.

"Oh, you wouldn't understand anyway," I replied.

I couldn't very well tell her I had to learn Second-class stuff like multiplication tables, could I?

I made up my mind to begin the term properly by starting to work in real earnest, and I sat down at once to go over the multiplication tables. Of course, I didn't dare to repeat them aloud while Lika was there, but she soon finished her lessons and ran outside to play with her friends. As soon as she was gone, I recited the tables aloud and finally learned them so well that you could wake me up in the middle of the night and ask me what seven times seven or eight times nine was, and I'd give you the right answer.

The very next day Olga Nikolayevna called on me in class and made me go over the tables.

"See how well you can do when you try?" she said. "I know you have a good head if you only use it."

Everything would have been all right if Olga Nikolayevna had stuck to the multiplication tables. But she had to go and ask me to do a problem on the blackboard. And of course that spoiled everything.

I went to the blackboard, and Olga Nikolayevna dictated a problem about some carpenters who were building a house. I wrote out the whole problem and began to figure out how to do it. But of course I wasn't really figuring out anything. It was a hard problem, and I knew I wouldn't be able to do it anyway. But I wrinkled my forehead to show Olga Nikolayevna I was thinking hard, and in the meantime I began signalling frantically to the fellows for help. But to prompt somebody standing at the blackboard isn't so easy, and so they kept quiet.

"Well, how are you going to solve the problem?" Olga Nikolayevna asked. "What will you do first?"

I wrinkled my brow hard, turned halfway to the fellows and winked for all I was worth. They saw that I was in a bad way and started whispering the answer.

"Be quiet, boys. Don't try to prompt him. I'll help him out myself if he needs it," Olga Nikolayevna said.

She explained the problem and told me how to do the first part. I put it all down correctly, although I didn't understand anything.

"That's right," said Olga Nikolayevna. "Now what do we do next?"

I pretended to think and winked hard at the boys, who began whispering again.

"Silence! I can hear everything you say. You are only interfering!" said Olga Nikolayevna, and went on explaining.

With Olga Nikolayevna's help and with some prompting from the boys I finally solved the problem.

"Now, are you sure you understand how to do problems like these?" Olga Nikolayevna asked me.

I said I did. Of course I didn't understand at all, but I was ashamed to admit it. What's more, I was afraid Olga Nikolayevna would give me a bad mark if I said I didn't understand. I went back to my place, copied the problem into my copy-book and decided to work on it properly when I got home.

After the lesson I said to the fellows:

"What's the idea of prompting so Olga Nikolayevna can hear? Don't you chaps know how to prompt? You yelled so loud it's a wonder they didn't hear you in the next room."

"How do you expect us to prompt you when you're standing at the blackboard!" said Vasya Yerokhin. "It isn't as if you were standing at your desk. . . ."

"That's just an excuse. You've got to prompt quietly so no one else will hear."

"That's what I did, but you didn't hear what I said."

"You must have been mumbling under your nose, then," I said.

"There's no pleasing you, is there? You don't know what you want."

"The whole idea of prompting is bad," said Vanya Pakhomov. "You must learn to figure things out for yourself instead of waiting for others to tell you the answer."

"Why should I bother my head when I can't do those silly problems anyway?" I said.

"That's because you don't want to use your brains," said Gleb Skameikin. "You rely on others to think for you instead of doing it yourself. I'm not going to prompt anyone any more. It's time we had order in this class."

"If you won't, the others will," I said.

"Well, I'm going to put a stop to this prompting business," said Gleb.

"Is that so? You're smart, aren't you!"

"That's got nothing to do with it. I'm monitor, and I won't allow any prompting."

"You needn't be stuck up even if you are monitor. You won't be monitor always. The boys may elect me next time for all you know."

"Maybe they will, but they haven't yet, so it's too soon to talk."

The others mixed in and started an argument about prompting in class. But the argument didn't get anywhere because Dima Balakirev came running in to say that the older boys had laid out a football field on the common at the back of the school, and we agreed to meet after school for a game. After dinner we gathered on the common and formed two sides. There was some trouble in our team at first because nobody wanted to be goal-keeper. Everyone wanted to run about the field and get a chance of scoring. They wanted me to be goal-keeper, but I wanted to be centre-forward or at the very least a half-back. Luckily for me, Shishkin, the new boy, agreed to be goal-keeper. He threw down his jacket and took his place, and the game began.



At first the other side had the advantage. They kept attacking our goal. Our team rushed about but only got in one another's way. Luckily for us, Shishkin turned out to be a first-rate goal-keeper. He jumped like a cat or a panther and didn't let a single ball through. At last we broke away and dribbled the ball down to the other end.



Then, after a scramble, one of *out* fellows scored—1 : 0 in our favour! That bucked us up, and we began doing all the pressing. Before long we got another goal, and the score was 2:0 for us. After that, however, the play was all on





our side of the field, and we began getting the worst of it. We couldn't get clear for the life of us. So Shish-kin picked up the ball and ran bouncing it right up to the other goal. He was just going to kick it through when Igor Grachyov got it away from him and passed to Slava Vedernikov. Slava Vedernikov passed to Vanya Pakhomov, and before we knew what had happened, it was back again on our side, and someone slammed it through the open goal. So the score was 2:1. Shishkin was away from his post again when the other side scored the equalizer. We told him off for leaving his post, and he promised to stay put for the rest of the game. But he didn't. He kept running down the field, and the other side got plenty of chances with an open goal. The game lasted until quite late. We scored sixteen goals, and the other side, twenty-one. We wanted to go on playing but it got so dark we could hardly see the ball and we had to go home. All the way home we blamed Shishkin for leaving the goal open and losing us the game.

"You'd be a fine goalie, Shishkin," said Yura Kasatkin, "if only you'd stand in the goal. If you'd do that, our team would be unbeatable."

"I can't stand still," said Shishkin. "That's why I prefer basket-ball. You don't need any goal-keepers; you all run about and you can handle the ball. Let's organize a basket-ball team."

Shishkin began telling us how to play basket-ball; it sounded quite as good as football.

"We'll have to talk to our gym teacher about it," said Yura. "Perhaps he'll help us to get a court for basket-ball."

When we reached the corner, of our street, Shishkin suddenly let out a yell: "I've gone and left my jacket on the field!" And he ran all the way back.

Funny chap! He's always doing things like that.

It was after eight when I got home. Mum scolded me for staying out so late, but I told her that it wasn't really late, it was just that it

got darker earlier 'now than in summer. I explained that if it was summer-time nobody would think it was late because in summer the days are much longer and at this time it would be still quite light and everybody would think it was early.

Mum said I always had some excuse and told me to sit down at once and do my lessons. I was going to do that anyway. Not right away, of course, because I was very tired after the game and I felt in need of a little rest.

"Why aren't you doing your lessons?" Lika asked me. "Your brain must have had a good rest by now."

"I don't need you to tell me how much rest my brain needs!" I said.

After that I couldn't start doing my lessons right away because Lika would think it was she who had made me. So I decided to rest a. while longer and I began telling them about Shishkin, what a queer chap he was and how he had forgotten his jacket on the football field. Presently Dad came home from work. He told

us his factory had received an order to make machines for the Kuibyshev hydro-electric development, and again I couldn't do my lessons because I wanted to hear what Dad had to say.

Dad works at a steel mill. He's a pattern-maker. You probably don't know what that is, so I had better explain. Before casting some part for a machine, you have to make the part in wood. Now that wooden part is called a pattern. Why do you need a pattern? Let me tell you. The pattern is put in the mould which is a sort of iron box, only without a bottom. Then they put sand in the mould, and when they take the pattern out, its shape is left in the sand. Then they pour molten metal into the hollow, and when the metal cools, you get a part exactly the same shape as the pattern. When the works gets orders for some new parts, the engineers make the drawings and the patternmakers make their patterns according to the drawings. Of course the pattern-maker has to be very clever to follow

the engineer's drawings and make the right pattern, because if he doesn't do it right, they won't be able to make the part from it. My Dad is a very good pattern-maker. He even invented an electric fret-saw to cut small parts out of wood. Now he is designing a polishing .machine to polish the wooden patterns. They used to be polished by hand, but when Dad makes his machine, all the pattern-makers will polish by machine. Every evening after work Dad rests a little and then sits down to work on his machine or reads books to learn more about it, because it isn't as easy as you might think to design a polishing machine.

Dad had his supper and sat down to do his drawings. I sat down to do my lessons. First I did the geography, because it's the easiest. After that I did my Russian. I had to copy exercises and underline the roots, prefixes and suffixes of words. The root had to be underlined once, the prefix, twice and the suffix, three times. Next came English and

after that I turned to my arithmetic. Olga Nikolayevna had given us one of those nasty problems, and I hadn't the faintest idea how to do it. I sat for a whole hour staring into my book and racking my brains, but nothing helped. Besides, I was terribly sleepy by now. My eyes were smarting as if someone had thrown sand into them. "That's enough," Mum said. "It's time for bed. You can hardly keep your eyes open."



"But I haven't done my problem yet!"

"You ought to have done it before," said Mum. "It's no good sitting up late like this. You'll never learn anything that way. Your head doesn't work properly when you're tired."

"He must stay up until he finishes," said Dad. "Next time he'll know better than to leave his homework undone so late."

And so I sat and read the problem over and over until the figures began to nod and wiggle and hide behind one another as if they were playing hide-and-seek. I rubbed my eyes and tried to read the problem over again, but the letters kept jumping up and down. "What's the trouble?" Mum asked.

"It's a problem," I said. "The beastly thing simply won't come out."

"It's not the problem's fault, it's the pupil's."

Mum read the problem and began telling me how to do it, but for some reason I couldn't understand anything.

"Don't they explain the problems to you in school?" Dad asked.

"No," I said, "they don't."

"That's strange! When I went to school, the teacher always explained the problem first in class and then gave us examples to do at home."

"Maybe that's how it was when you went to school, but Olga Nikolayevna never explains

anything. She makes us do everything ourselves."

"Well, that sounds strange to me."

"Yes, it is strange," I said.

"What did you do at the arithmetic lesson?"

"We did a problem on the blackboard."

"Let's see that problem."

I showed him the problem I had copied into my note-book from the blackboard.

"But it's exactly the same as the one she gave you to do at home!" cried Dad. "And you go complaining about the teacher! This shows that she did tell you how to do the problem."

"'It isn't the same," I said. "That one is about carpenters building a house, and this one here is about tinsmiths making pails."

"You silly boy," said Dad. "In the first problem you had to find out how many days it took 25 carpenters to build 8 houses, and in this one you must find out how long it took 6 tinsmiths to make 36 pails. Both problems are solved in exactly the same way."

Dad began explaining how to do the problem, but my head was so fuzzy that I couldn't make anything out.

Dad finally lost patience. "You *are* a dunce! How can you be so stupid!"

My Dad isn't much good at explaining problems. Mum says he hasn't any pedagogical ability, which means he wouldn't be any good as a school-teacher. He usually begins quietly enough, but after a while he gets excited and starts shouting at me, and then my head stops working altogether, and I sit there like a dummy.

"I don't see what there is to understand," he said. "It's all as clear as daylight."

Whenever Dad sees that explaining won't help, he snatches a bit of paper and begins doing the problem himself.

"Look," he said. "Look how easy it is. Now, what must we find out first?"

I watched while he worked out the first part of the problem on a slip of paper.

"Is that clear?"

To tell the truth it wasn't the least bit clear, but I was so sleepy that I pretended I understood.

"There, you see!" said Dad, quite pleased. "You only need to use your brain a little and everything will be as easy as punch."

Then he solved the second part of the problem.

"Understand now?"

"Yes," I fibbed.

"Are you quite sure you do? Because if you don't, I can try to explain."

"No, it's quite clear."

I thought he would never finish the blooming problem. But at last he did, and I quickly copied the whole thing into my exercise book, put it away in my satchel and went off to bed.

Chapter Three



UR SCHOOL had been redecorated while we had been away on holiday. The class-room walls had all been painted white and there wasn't a single spot on them. Everything looked brand new. It really is a pleasure to study in a nice clean class-room like that. It actually seems brighter and more roomy, and gives you a nice feeling inside you.

When I came to school the next day, what did I see on the wall next to the blackboard but a charcoal drawing of a sailor boy. He wore a striped jersey, bell-bottomed trousers flapping in the breeze, a sailor's cap on his head, and

had a pipe in his mouth, and the smoke from the pipe swirled upwards in rings like the smoke from a steamer's funnel. He had such a dashing air about him that you couldn't look at him without laughing.

"Igor Grachyov drew it," Vasya Yerokhin informed me. "But mind you don't give him away!"

"Not me!" I assured him.

The boys were sitting at their desks admiring the sailor boy, laughing and making all sorts of funny jokes.

"What d'you think! We've got a sailor in our class now!"

Just before the bell rang Shishkin came dashing in.

"Seen the sailor?" I asked him and pointed to the wall. He looked at the drawing.

"Igor Grachyov drew it," I said. "But mind you don't blab."

"Blab yourself! Have you done your Russian exercise?"

" 'Course I have," I answered. "Do you think I come to school without doing my homework?"

"Well, I haven't. Just couldn't, see? Let me copy yours."

"There isn't any time. Lessons will begin in a minute."

"Never mind. I'll do it during the lesson."

I gave him my Russian jotter, and he started copying the exercise.

"Look," he says. "You've only underlined the prefix in *running* once, instead of twice. It's the root you're supposed to underline once."

"A fat lot you understand!" I said. "That is the root."

"Go on! How can *run* be the root? When did you ever see the root in front of the word? Where would the prefix go in that case?"

"There isn't any prefix in that word."

"Are there words without prefixes?"

"Of course there are."

"So that's it! I couldn't make it out for the life of me. I thought it had a prefix and a root but no suffix."

"You're hopeless," I said. "We went through all that in the Third."

"I can't remember that far back. Are you sure you have everything right? Because I'm going to copy it."

I was just going to explain to him all about roots, prefixes and suffixes when the bell rang and Olga Nikolayevna came in. She noticed the sailor boy at once, and her face looked very stern.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked. "Who drew that on the wall?"

Nobody said anything.

"The boy who dirtied that wall must stand up and admit it," said Olga Nikolayevna.

We were all silent. Nobody got up. Olga Nikolayevna frowned.

"Now look here, boys, don't you know that you must keep your class-room clean? What would the school be like if



everybody drew pictures on the walls? Surely you don't want your class-room to be dirty and untidy, do you?"

"No, no!" came a few uncertain voices.

"Then who did it?"

Silence.

"Gleb Skameikin, you are the monitor. You ought to know who did it."

"I don't know, Olga Nikolayevna. It was there when I came in."

"Remarkable!" said Olga Nikolayevna. "Someone must have drawn it. Yesterday the walls were perfectly clean. I was the last to leave. Who came to school first this morning?"

None of the boys owned up. Everyone said the class was full when he arrived.

In the meantime Shishkin was busy copying the exercise into his book. There was a big blot on my copy-book when he handed it back to me.

"What's this?" I said. "There wasn't any blot there when I gave it to you."

"Well, I didn't do it on purpose, did I?"

"I don't care whether you did it on purpose or not. You've no business giving me back my copy-book with a blot on it."

"How can I give it back to you without a blot when the blot is there already? I promise to be more careful next time."

"Next time what?" I asked.

"Next time I copy your exercises."

"Do you mean to say you're going to copy them all the time?" "Who said all the time? Just sometimes."

The argument ended there because Olga Nikolayevna called Shish-kin to the blackboard and gave him a problem to solve about a lot of house painters who painted the walls of a school. He had to find out how much money the school had to pay for painting all the classrooms and corridors.

"Poor old Shishkin," I thought. "That's the end of him. Solving problems on the blackboard is a bit harder than copying exercises from other people's books."

To my surprise, Shishkin managed the problem very well. True, he took an awful long time over it because it was a long one and very hard, but there wasn't any prompting from the class because anyone could see he knew how to do it himself.

Of course we all knew that Olga Nikolayevna had given that problem on purpose, and it was clear that we hadn't heard the end of the sailor boy business yet. At the next lesson Igor Alexandrovich, the Director, came in. Igor Alexandrovich isn't at all severe to look at. He always looks pleasant and he has a nice, kind voice, but I for one have always been a little afraid of him because he's very big. He's as big as Dad, only taller, and he wears a long loose jacket with three buttons, and a pair of spectacles on his nose.

I thought he was going to shout at us, but he spoke in a quiet voice, telling us how much the state has to lay out for the education of every pupil and how important it is for us to do well in school and take care of the school

property. Anyone who damages school property, and that includes the walls, is doing harm to the people, be cause all the money for school comes from the people. Then he said:

"I am sure that the boy who drew that picture on the wall did not want to harm the school. If he owns up, he will prove that he is honest and that he simply didn't know what he was doing."

If I had been the one, I am sure I would have got up and confessed after what Igor Alexandrovich had said; I was sure that was what Igor Grachyov would do. But he evidently didn't want to prove that he was honest because he sat at his desk and said nothing. Then Igor Alexandrovich said that no doubt the boy who had done the drawing was ashamed to admit his fault just now, but perhaps he would think it over and muster the courage to come to his office and confess.

After lessons, Tolya Dyozhkin, who is the chairman of our Pioneer Council, went over to Igor and said:

"You're a fine one. Who told you to go and muck up the nice clean wall? Now see what you've gone and done."

"I didn't mean to do anything wrong."

"What did you do it for, then?"

"I don't know, honest I don't! I just drew it without thinking."

"Without thinking! And now the whole class is in disgrace because of you."

"Why the whole class?"

"Because any of us can be blamed for it."

"Maybe somebody from some other class came in and drew it, how do they know?"

"Well, don't do it again, that's all," said Tolya.

"All right, I shan't do it again, I only wanted to see what it would look like," Igor said.

He took a rag and tried to rub out the sailor boy, but he only managed to make matters worse. The sailor boy was still there but now he had a great black smudge all round him. The boys took the rag away so that Igor wouldn't make the wall any dirtier than it was.

After school we went to play football again and played until it was quite dark. On the way home Shishkin persuaded me to come in to his place. It turns out he lives in our street, in a small wooden two-storey house not far from ours. All the other houses in our street are big, four- and five-storey houses like ours, and I'd often wondered who lived in that little wooden house. And now it turned out that Shishkin lived there. I didn't want to go in because it was late, but he said:

"Come on, they won't scold me for staying out so late if you come in with me."

"But I'll get scolded too when I come home," I said.

"That's all right. I can come home with you afterwards, if you like. That way neither of us will get scolded."

"All right, then."

We climbed up a creaking staircase with peeling banisters, and Shishkin knocked at a door covered with torn black oilcloth with the stuffing sticking out in spots.

"Kostya, you bad boy! Wherever have you been all this time?" cried his mother when she opened the door.

"Mother, this is Maleyev, my classmate. He and I share the same desk in class."

"Come in, come in," said his mother, and her voice sounded much less stern.

We stepped inside.

"Heaven help us! What on earth have you been doing? Just look at yourselves!"

I looked at Shishkin. His face was scarlet, and there were dirty smudges on his cheeks and forehead. The tip of his nose was quite black. I daresay I didn't look much better because the ball had hit me in the face. Shishkin nudged me and said:

"Come on, let's get washed, 'cause you'll get it in the neck too if you go home looking like that."

We went into the room and Shishkin introduced me to his aunt.

"Aunt Zina, this is Maleyev, my classmate."

Aunt Zina was quite young, in fact I took her for Shishkin's elder sister at first. She looked at me with a mocking smile. I must have *4* looked pretty funny with my face all dirty. Shishkin nudged me again, and we went to the sink to wash.

"Do you like animals?" Shishkin asked as I was soaping my face.

"Depends what kind," I said. "If you mean tigers or crocodiles, the answer is no. They bite."

"Silly ass, I don't mean those kind. Do you like mice?"

"No, I don't care much for mice either. They spoil things gnawing at everything."

"They don't do anything of the kind. What nonsense you talk." "Mice don't gnaw? Why, they gnawed right through a book of mine once."

"Well, you probably didn't give them anything to eat." "I should say I didn't! What would I want to feed them for?" "I feed mine every day. I've even made a house for them."

"You must be crazy," I said. "Whoever heard of making houses for mice?"

"Well, they've got to live somewhere, haven't they? Come, I'll show you."

We finished washing and went to the kitchen. There under a chair stood a cute little house made of cardboard boxes with lots of doors and windows. It was full of funny little white animals which kept climbing out through the doors and windows, and back up the walls into the house. The house had a chimney-pot sticking up out of the roof, and one of the little white animals was peeping out of it.

I had never seen anything like it before.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Mice, of course."

"Go on. Mice are grey. These are white."

"Haven't you ever heard of white mice?"

Shishkin picked up one of the mice and gave it to me to hold. It was as white as snow, except for its tail which was long and pink and seemed to have no hair on it. It sat quietly on

my palm wiggling its little pink nose as if it were smelling something, and its eyes were as red as coral beads.

"We don't have any white mice at home, only grey ones," I said.

"These aren't the same kind, you silly," Shishkin laughed. "You buy these in the animal shop. I bought four of them and now see how they've multiplied! I can give you a couple, if you like."

"What do you feed them?"

"They eat everything. Bread, milk, cereal."

"All right," I said.

Shishkin found a cardboard box, put two mice in it, and stuck the box in his pocket.

"I'd better carry them myself. You might squash them," he said.

We put on our jackets.

"Going out again?" Kostya's mother asked.

"I'll be back right away. I'm only going to Vitya's for a minute.

I promised him."

We went outside and in a few minutes we were in my place. When Mum saw I wasn't alone, she didn't scold me for coming home so late.

"This is my schoolmate Kostya," I told her.

"You're the new boy?" Mum said.

"Yes, I started this term."

"What school did you go to before?"

"I went to school in Nalchik. We lived there until Aunt Zina finished school. She wanted to go to a theatre school, but there isn't one in Nalchik and so we came here."

"Do you like it here, or do you prefer Nalchik?"

"Nalchik was better. But I like it here, too. We lived in Krasnozavodsk as well. It was nice there, too."

"That shows what a Sensible lad you are."

"Oh, no, Mother says I'm not a bit sensible. She says I've no character and I'll never get anywhere in life."

"Why does she say that?"

"Because I can never get my lessons done in time."

"Then you're just like our Vitya. He doesn't like to do his lessons in time either. You two ought to get together and try to change your characters."

Just then Lika came in.

"This is my sister Lika," I said to Shishkin.

"How do you do?" said Shishkin.

"How do you do?" replied Lika, and stared at him as if he were a picture or something instead of an ordinary boy.

"I haven't got a sister," said Shishkin. "Nor a brother either. I haven't anybody."

"Would you like to have a sister or a brother?" said Lika.

"Very much. I would make wonderful toys for them, and I'd give them animals to play with, and I'd look after them. Mother says I don't take care of anything or anyone. But that's because I haven't anyone to take care of."

"You can take care of your mother."

"How can I? I hardly see her. She goes off to work in the morning and she doesn't come back till late in the evening. And sometimes she goes off in the evening again."

"What does she do?"

"She drives *a.* car."

"Then you must take care of yourself, so that your mother won't have to do it."

"I know I ought," said Shishkin. "Did you find your jacket?" Lika asked him. "My jacket? Oh, you mean. . . . Yes, I found it. It was lying on the football field just where I left it."

"You'll catch cold that way one of these days," said Lika. "Oh, no, I wouldn't do that."

"Of course you will, if you go about forgetting your coat and your cap in the winter."

"Oh, I shan't forget my coat. . . . Do you like mice?" "Mice?" Lika was so taken aback she didn't know what to say. "Would you like a couple?" "Oh, no, thank you very much!"

"They're awfully nice," said Shishkin, and he took the box with the white mice out of his pocket.

"Oh, aren't they darlings!" Lika squeaked.

"What are you giving her my mice for?" I protested. "First you give them to me and then you give them to her."

"I'm only showing them to her. I'll give her some others. I have plenty more," said Shishkin. "If you like I can let her have these and get some others for you."

"No, no," said Lika, "let Vitya have them." "All right, I'll bring you some tomorrow. But you can look at these now."

Lika held out her hand to the mice: "Do they bite?" "Oh, no! They're quite tame."



When Shishkin went away, Lika and I got a cardboard biscuit box, cut out windows and doors in it and put the mice inside. It was fun watching them peeking out of the windows.

It was quite late again by the time I got down to my lessons. As usual, I began with the easiest, leaving my arithmetic to the last. And

again there was a difficult problem to do. So I closed my arithmetic book, put all my books into my satchel and decided to copy the problem from someone in school the next day. If I started trying to do the problem, Mum would notice that I was doing my lessons late again and scold me, and then Dad would have to lay aside his work and begin explaining the problem to me. And why should he waste his time doing my arithmetic? It is much more important for him to make designs for his polishing machine or invent some new kind of pattern.

While I was doing my lessons, Lika lined the mice house with wadding so the mice could make a nest for themselves. Then she put in some cereal, and bread crumbs, and a saucer of milk. If you looked through the window, you could see them sitting inside their little house chewing the grains. Sometimes one of them would sit up on its hind legs and wash itself with its front paws, rubbing its little face ever so quickly. It looked so comical we nearly split

our sides. Lika sat a long time by the little house peeping into the windows and laughing.

"What a nice friend you've got, Vitya!" she said when I came over to look.

"Kostya, you mean?"

"Yes."

"What's so nice about him?"

"He's so polite. He talks so nicely. He even talked to me."

"Why shouldn't he talk to you?"

"Well, after all I'm a girl."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, the other boys don't talk to me. They're too stuck up I suppose. I'm glad you're friends with him."

I wanted to tell her that Shishkin wasn't as nice as she thought, that he copied homework and had even made a blot in my copy-book, but for some reason I said:

"Of course he's nice! I wouldn't be friends with him if he wasn't. All the fellows in our class are nice."

Chapter Four



OME TIME passed, three, four or maybe five days, I don't quite remember now how many, and one ^[a]y Seryozha Bukatin, who is the editor of our class wall newspaper, said:

"Olga Nikolayevna, there isn't anyone on our editorial board who can draw. Last year Fedya Rybkin did all our drawings, but now there's no one to do it and our newspaper isn't interesting without drawings. We must elect someone to be artist."

"Yes, but it must be someone who can draw well," said Olga Nikolayevna. "I have a suggestion. Let everyone bring drawings to

class tomorrow. Then we can judge whose is the best."

"But suppose we haven't anything to bring?"

"You can draw something today. That ought not to be so hard."

"Of course not," we agreed.

The next day we all brought drawings. Some of us brought old ones, others, new ones. Some boys brought folders full of drawings, and Igor Grachyov came with a whole album. I brought a few too. We laid them out on the desks, and Olga Nikolayevna went around and examined them. Finally she reached Igor Grachyov's desk and began looking through the album. It was full of drawings of the sea, ships, boats and schooners.

"Igor Grachyov draws better than any of you," she said. "He could be our artist."

Igor grinned from ear to ear. Olga Nikolayevna turned the pages of his album and came to a drawing of a sailor in a striped jersey and with a pipe in his mouth. It was an exact copy of the sailor boy on our wall. Her

face darkened and she looked sternly at Igor. He got very red and fidgety, and then he blurted out:

"I drew the sailor on the wall."

"Did you? Then why didn't you own up at once? That wasn't honest of you, Igor. Tell me, why did you do a thing like that?"

"I don't know, Olga Nikolayevna! It was an accident, really. I didn't realize what I was doing.

"Well, I'm glad you have confessed now at any rate. After class you must go to the Director and apologize."

After lessons Igor went to the Director and apologized. "The state spent a great deal of money redecorating the school," Igor Alexandrovich told him. "We can't afford to do it over again. Now go home and come back after you have had your dinner."

After dinner Igor came back to school. He was given a pail of paint and a brush, and he painted over the spot on the wall where the sailor boy had been.

We were sure that Olga Nikolayevna would not let him be the artist after that. But she said: "He'll be better occupied drawing for the newspaper than practising his art on the walls."

So we elected him, and everyone was very glad. I was glad too, although to tell the truth I hadn't much reason to be. Let me tell you why.

Following Shishkin's example, I had stopped doing my arithmetic at home altogether and copied all the problems from the other boys' books. As the proverb says, bad examples are catching.

"Why should I give myself a headache worrying about those problems?" I said to myself. "I don't understand them anyhow. Better to copy them down and be done with it. It's quicker that way, and then Dad and Mum will stop fussing about my not being able to do my arithmetic."

None of the fellows minded my copying from their copy-books except Tolya Dyozhkin, the chairman of the Pioneer Council.

"You'll never learn arithmetic if you go on copying from others!" he warned me.

"What do I need arithmetic for?" I said. "I can get along fine without it. Besides, I just haven't the gift for it."

Of course it is easy enough to copy sums, but when you're called on to answer in class your only hope is that the others will prompt you. Luckily for me the fellows didn't let me down. And everything would have been all right if it weren't for Gleb Skameikin. Ever since he announced that time that he was going to put a stop to prompting, he had been trying to think up some way of doing it, and would you believe it, he got the nasty idea of getting the boys who put out the wall newspaper to draw a silly cartoon of me. And so one fine day I came to school and found a cartoon of myself, standing by the blackboard trying to do a sum, with my ears, as big as a donkey's, cocked so as to hear the boys prompting me. And underneath were four lines of the silliest verse you ever heard:

This is Vitya, not an ass,
Catching promptings in the class.
Vitya's ears have grown this long,
Still he gets his answers wrong!

Or something like that, I can't remember exactly. Utter rot, of course! I naturally flew into a rage. I guessed right away that Igor Grachyov had done the cartoon because there hadn't been any cartoons in the paper until he got on it.

So I went to him and said: "You take that drawing down from there or you'll be sorry."

"I can't do that, old man. I have no right to," he said. "I'm only the artist. I was told to draw it, so I drew it, but it isn't my business to put it in or take it out."

"Whose business is it?"

"The editor's. He's the boss."

I went to Seryozha Bukatin.

"So it's your work, is it?" I said to him. "I don't see you putting up cartoons of yourself in the paper. Why pick on me?"

"You ass, do you think I put things in myself? What do we have an editorial board for? We all decide together what goes in. Gleb Skameikin wrote the verses and ordered the cartoon because we've got to put a stop to prompting in class. We passed a decision about that in the Pioneer Council."

I rushed to Skameikin.

"Take that drawing out at once," I said. "Or else I'll make mincemeat of you."

"You'll do what?"

"If you don't like mincemeat, I'll grind you to powder!"/

"Poof!" says Gleb, "tough chap, aren't you?"

"All right, I'll cut it out of the paper myself, then."

"You daren't do that," says Tolya Dyozhkin. "Because it's true. And even if it wasn't true, you wouldn't have the right to tear it out of the paper. All you can do is to write a reply."

"A reply, eh? All right, I'll write you a reply!"

The whole class had gathered around the newspaper by this time and were pointing at the cartoon and laughing themselves sick. But I wasn't going to leave it at that, and I sat down to write a reply. But nothing came of it, because I hadn't the slightest idea how to do it. So I went to our Pioneer Leader Volodya, told him the whole story and asked him how to write a reply.

"I'll tell you what you do," said Volodya. "You give a written promise to turn over a new leaf and try for better marks so that you won't need prompting any more. Your letter will be inserted in the wall newspaper, and I'll tell them to take out the cartoon."

I did as Volodya told me. I wrote a letter to the newspaper promising to work harder and not to depend on prompting any more.

The next day the cartoon was gone and my letter was pasted in the most prominent place on the paper. I was very pleased, and, as a matter of fact, I really did intend to begin

working harder at my lessons, but somehow I kept putting it off, and a few days later when we had an arithmetic test I got 2 out of 5. Of course I wasn't the only one. Sasha Medvedkin also got a 2, so he and I were in the same boat. Olga Nikolayevna put that 2 in our report cards and told us our parents would have to sign the cards.

On the way home from school that day I felt pretty miserable. I walked along, racking my brains for some way of getting rid of that horrid 2 and wondering how to break it gently to Mum, so that she wouldn't be too hard on me.

"You ought to do what Mitya Kruglov did," Shishkin said.

"Who the dickens is Mitya Kruglov?"

"A boy in our class at the Nalchik school."

"Well, what did he do?"

"Whenever he got a 2, he used to go home and sit down with a long face and say nothing. He'd sit like that for a whole hour, or two hours even, and he wouldn't go out to play or

anything. Finally his mother would begin to get worried.

" 'What's the matter with you?' she'd ask him. ,

" 'Nothing.'

" 'What are you looking so miserable about?'

" 'I dunno.'

" 'You must have been up to some mischief at school?'

"'No,' he says. -

" 'Had a fight with someone?'

" 'No.'

" 'Broken a window?'

"'No.'

" 'Well, you're acting very queer,' says his mother.

"At dinner time he wouldn't eat anything.

" 'Why aren't you eating?'

" 'I don't want anything.'

" 'What's the matter, no appetite?'

" 'Mhm.'

" 'Well, you'd better go out and get some fresh air, then.'

" 'I don't want to.'

" 'What do you want, then?'

" 'Nothing.'

" 'You're not sickening for something, I hope?'

" 'No, I'm all right.'

"His mother would feel his forehead and stick a thermometer under his arm.

" 'No, your temperature is quite normal. Now, for goodness' sake tell me what's the trouble. You're driving me crazy!'

" 'I got 2 out of 5 for arithmetic.'

"'Heavens!' his mother would say, looking relieved. 'So that's what all this nonsense is about, eh?'

"'Mhm.'

" 'If you'd sit down and do your lessons instead of acting like a ninny you wouldn't get bad marks.'

"And that would be the end of it," Shishkin wound up.

"That's all very well," I said. "He might get away with it the first time, but the next time

his mother would guess at once that he'd got a 2."

"Oh, next time he'd think up something else."

"A clever chap that Kruglov must have been," I said.

"Yes, he was a very clever chap. He was always getting 2's, and every time he'd invent some other way of getting out of it."

I decided to try Mitya Kruglov's method. When I got home, I sat down, hung my head and tried to look as miserable as I possibly could. Mum noticed it at once.

"What's the trouble?" she asked me. "I suppose you got a 2?"

I had to own up right away and what a row there was! But I won't go into details about that because it isn't really interesting.

The next day Shishkin also got a 2 in Russian, and he got it hot at home, too, and the day after that there was a cartoon in the wall newspaper about both of us: me and

Shishkin walking down the street with 2's on legs running after us. , I was furious.

"Look here," I said to Seryozha Bukatin, "I've had enough of this!"

"What are you so ratty about?" said Seryozha. "Didn't you both get 2's?"

"But we weren't the only ones! What about Sasha Medvedkin?

Why isn't there a cartoon about him?"

"I don't know. We told Igor to draw the three of you but he only did two for some reason."

"I was going to do all three," said Igor, "but there wasn't enough room, so I only drew two. I'll do one of Sasha next time."

"I don't care," I said, "I'm not going to stand for it. I'm going to write a reply!"

"Come on," I said to Shishkin. "Let's write a reply."



"What kind of reply?"

"Oh, it's easy as pie: you just write a promise to work harder and get better marks. That's what Volodya told me to do last time." "Good!" said Shishkin. "You write it and I'll copy yours." I sat down and wrote a promise to work harder at lessons and get good marks in future. Shishkin copied what I had written and added a promise not to get anything less than 4's.

"That's just to make it sound better," he explained. We handed both replies to Seryozha Bukatin. "And now you can take that cartoon out," I said. "And see you put our statements in the most prominent place." "All right," he said.

But when we came to school next day, the cartoon was still there and there was no sign of our replies. I went straight to Seryozha and demanded an explanation.

"We discussed your promises at a meeting of the editorial board, he said, "and decided not to put them in because you made the same

promise before and instead of doing better you got low marks again."

"Never mind that," I said. "You don't have to put my reply in if you don't want to, but you have to take out that cartoon."

"We don't have to do anything of the kind," he said. "If you think that you can reel off promises every time without intending to keep them, you're mistaken."

At that point Shishkin pipes up.

"But I haven't given any promises before, have I? Why didn't you put my reply in?"

"Yours will go in the next issue." "And in the meantime I'll hang up there?" "That's right."

"See if I care," said Shishkin.

But I wasn't going to let it go at that. In the next break I went to Volodya and told him the whole story.

"I'll talk to the boys and ask them to put out the next number as soon as possible, with your replies in," he said. "We're going to have a meeting about marks soon, so your items will be very timely."

"But can't we take out that cartoon and put the items in its place right now?" I asked him.

"No, that's not the way it's done," said Volodya. "But why did they do it last time?"

"Last time they thought you really meant it when you said you were going to work harder, and they made an exception for you. But we can't go ripping up the wall newspaper every time. After all, those newspapers are kept on file, you know. They are a sort of record of how the class worked, and what progress the pupils made. For all you know, some of the boys might grow up to be famous inventors, or Stakhanovites, or flyers, or scientists, and the old file of the class newspaper will show how they studied in school.".

Now, that didn't appeal to me one bit. You see, I had long since made up my mind to be a famous flyer or explorer when I grew up, and now I imagined a schoolboy looking over the files of our class newspaper and saying: "Why look, fellows, he used to get 2's when he was in school!"

I didn't argue with Volodya any more, but what he had told me put me in the dumps. The more I thought of it the less I liked it, but after a while it occurred to me that perhaps by the time I grew up the paper would get lost somewhere and my disgrace would never be known. After that I felt better.

Chapter Five



THAT CARTOON hung on the wall for a whole week. It wasn't taken down until the day before the meeting, when a new paper was put up. This one had no cartoons, and it carried our two replies, mine and Shishkin's. There were some other things in the paper, too, but I don't remember now what they were about. Volodya had told us all to prepare for the meeting which was going to discuss the progress made by every boy in the class. During the long break Yura Kasatkin, who is the head of our Pioneer group, called us together to discuss our progress. There wasn't

much to discuss. Everyone said that Shishkin and I had got to start getting better marks in a hurry.

We agreed, of course. After all, we didn't particularly enjoy getting 2's either.

The next day we held the class meeting.

Olga Nikolayevna told us how the class was making out as a whole, what marks we were getting and what subject each of us ought to pay special attention to. Those of us with 2's were told off, but so were the 3's, because those who always get 3's are liable to find themselves getting 2's before they know it.

Then she said that discipline in our class was very bad, that we talked during lessons and kept prompting one another.

After that we had the floor. I say "we," but actually I didn't say anything because it would have been silly of me with a 2 on my report card to get up and make an exhibition of myself. So I kept mum and let the others do the talking.

Gleb Skameikin spoke first. He said that prompting was to blame for everything. That chap has "prompting" on his brain. He said that if we stopped prompting, discipline was bound to improve and nobody would rely on the others whispering the answers, because if nobody whispered the answers, those who relied on prompting would have to make an effort to think for themselves.

"From now on I'm going to whisper the wrong answers on purpose. That will teach them not to rely on prompting," he said.

"That's a nice comradely thing to do," said Vasya Yerokhin.

"I suppose you think prompting is comradely?"

"No, prompting isn't comradely either. You must help your comrades by explaining what they don't understand, but prompting is only harmful," said Vasya.

"That's what we've been saying all along, but the prompting still goes on."

"Well, the prompters will have to be shown up, that's the only way out."

"How are you going to show them up?"

"By writing about them in the wall newspaper."

"That's right!" shouted Gleb. "We'll start a campaign in the newspaper against prompting."

After that the boys from the first and second Pioneer groups spoke. They said they were going to fight for the honour of the whole class and promised to work for high marks.



Then Olga Nikolayevna spoke. She said that if we wanted to study well we must organize our time properly. We must go to bed early and get up early. We must begin the days with setting-up exercises and spend as much time as possible in the fresh air. Lessons ought not to be done right

after school; we must rest for an hour or two first. (Just what I've been telling Lika all the time!) But we must do our homework in the day-time, she said, because it's harmful to do lessons late at night when your brain gets tired and you can't think properly. When you do your lessons, you must begin with the hardest and leave the easiest for the last.

Slava Vedernikov said:

"Olga Nikolayevna, you say we ought to rest for an hour or two after school. But how are we supposed to rest? Take me, I can't sit still and do nothing. It gives me the willies."

"Resting doesn't necessarily mean sitting with your hands folded. You can go for a walk or play games."

"May we play football?" I asked.

"Of course. A game of football is a very good way to relax," said Olga Nikolayevna. "But you mustn't play all day long. An hour of football is all you need to clear your head for lessons."

"Soon the rainy weather will start," said Shishkin. "The football field will be all muddy, and there'll be nowhere to play."

"That's all right, boys," said Volodya. "We'll soon have a gymnasium in school, and we'll be able to play basket-ball in the winter."

"Basket-ball!" cried Shishkin. "Hurrah! I'll be captain. I was captain of a basket-ball team once, honest I was!"

"You'd better see to your Russian first," said Volodya.

"My Russian? Oh—of course! I'll see to it," said Shishkin.

That ended the meeting.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" said Volodya when all the others had gone and only our group remained.



"Why?" we asked.

"You only promised to stop getting 2's, when

all the other groups pledged to get nothing less than 4's."

"I don't see why we're any worse than the others," said Lenya Astafyev. "If they can get no less than 4's, why can't we?"

"Who said they're any better?" asked Vanya Pakhomov.

"Listen, fellows," said Vasya Yerokhin. "We've got to pull ourselves up, too. I promise faithfully to work for nothing less than 4's."

That got me.

"He's right," I said. "Our group is no worse than the others. I'm not going to lag behind either. You'll see. I just haven't begun trying properly yet, but now I'm going to. I only have to get started."

"Yes, you only have to get started and then you'll wish you hadn't," said Shishkin.

"What about you?" Volodya asked him. "Don't you want to get better marks?"

"I don't aim for 4's," said Shishkin. "Not in all subjects at any rate. For Russian I can promise only to get 3's."

"Listen to him!" said Yura. "The whole class is undertaking to work harder and get higher marks, except him. You're a fine one."

"How can I promise something that I can't do? I never got more than 3 for Russian in my life, and I don't expect I ever will. A 3 isn't such a bad mark."

"Look here, Shishkin," said Volodya. "You mustn't be so stubborn. Didn't you sign a statement promising to get nothing less than 4's for all subjects?"

"When did I promise that?"

"What about that?" Volodya pointed to the wall newspaper with our promises in it.

"So I did," said Shishkin. "I'd forgotten."

"Well, what do you say now?"

"I suppose there's no way out now. I'll just have to," Shishkin gave in.

"Hurrah!" yelled the others. "Good for Shishkin. He didn't let us down. Now we'll all fight for the honour of our class."

But Shishkin wasn't at all pleased. In fact he was so upset he wouldn't talk to me all the

way home. He was sore at me for having persuaded him to write that reply in the newspaper.

Chapter Six



DON'T know about Shishkin, but I decided to turn over a new leaf right away. The most important thing was a time-table. I would go to bed earlier, about 10 o'clock as Olga Nikolayevna had said, and I would get up earlier and go over my lessons again before school. After school I would play football for about an hour and a half, and then, with a clear head, I would sit down to my homework. After that I could do whatever I liked—play with the boys, or read a book until it was time to go to bed.

I planned everything nicely and went off to play football before doing my homework. I had

made up my mind not to play more than an hour and a half or at the most two hours, but the minute I got on to the field everything flew out of my head, and by the time I remembered my resolution it was quite dark. So I didn't get down to my lessons until late, and again my head didn't work properly. I vowed to myself that I wouldn't stay out so late next time, but next day the same thing happened again. All the time we were playing I kept telling myself: "Just one more goal and then I'll go home," but somehow, every time we scored a goal, I put off going until we'd scored the next one. And that went on until it was dark again.

This time I got quite annoyed with myself. "This won't do, my lad!"' I said, and I began trying to figure out why it was that I couldn't stick to my resolutions. I thought and thought and finally I came to the conclusion that the whole trouble was that I had no will-power. I had some sort of a will, of course, but it was so weak that I could never make myself do what I ought to do or stop doing what I shouldn't. For

instance, if I began reading some interesting book, I simply couldn't tear myself away from it. My lessons would still have to be done, or it would be time to go to bed, and I would go on reading. Mum would order me to bed. Dad would tell me it was time to go to sleep, but I wouldn't listen until they turned out the light. And it was the same with football. I just didn't have the will-power to stop playing. That was the trouble!

I saw I'd been very much mistaken about myself. I had always imagined myself to be a fellow with a very strong character and lots of will-power, and it turned out that I was a jelly-fish like Shishkin. I decided it was time to start cultivating a strong will. Now, how do people cultivate will-power? By doing the things they don't want to do, and not doing the things they want to. For instance, I never liked doing setting-up exercises in the morning, so I decided that from now on I would begin doing them regularly. When I wanted to go and play football, I would stay at home; and when I

wanted to read an interesting book, I would find something else to do. I would begin at once.

It just happened that on this particular day Mum baked my favourite cake for tea. I got the nicest piece, right from the middle. But when I saw how badly I wanted to eat that cake, I decided that I wouldn't. I ate a piece of plain bread instead and left my cake on the plate.

"Why aren't you eating your cake?" Mum asked me.

"I'm not going to eat it until the day after tomorrow. I'll have it for tea in exactly two days from now."

Mum smiled. "It will be quite stale by then. You'd better eat it now."

"No, I'm testing my will-power. If I don't eat it for two days, that means I have a strong will."

"And if you do?" Lika wanted to know. "Silly question! If I do, that means I am weak-willed." "I don't think you'll be able to hold out," said Lika. "We'll see."

The next morning I got up and did my exercises, although I didn't want to in the least. Then I went and splashed myself all over with cold water, which is something else I dislike doing. Then I had breakfast and went to school. My piece of cake lay on the table near my place. When I came home it was still lying there, but Mum had covered it with the top of the sugar bowl so it wouldn't get stale. I lifted off the cover and looked at it, but it wasn't even beginning to get stale. I was dying to gobble it up then and there, but I fought back the desire.

I decided that I wouldn't play football that day. I would simply rest for an hour or so and then begin doing my lessons. So when dinner was over I began to rest. But how the dickens do people rest? You can't just sit and twiddle your thumbs. To rest properly you have to play games or do something else that's interesting. "But what shall I do?" I wondered. "What game shall I play?" Then I had an idea: "I'll pop out for a game of football."

Before I had time to think, my legs had carried me outside. The piece of cake was left lying on the plate.

On the way down the street I pulled myself up. "Hold on, there! What are you doing? You want to play football, don't you? Well, that's just what you're not supposed to do. Is that the way to cultivate will-power?" I was going to turn back, but then I thought: "I'll just go and watch the other fellows, I shan't play myself."

When I got to the field, the game was in full swing. Shishkin caught sight of me and yelled:

"What are you waiting for! They've scored ten goals already! Come and help us out!"

And before I knew it I was an extra man on the field chasing the ball.

Of course it was late again when I got home.

"What a spineless creature I am!" I thought to myself. "I began the day so well and that blooming game went and spoiled everything!"

When I got home the cake was still lying on the plate. I picked it up and ate it.

"It doesn't make any difference now," I thought. "I haven't any will-power anyway."

Lika came in, and when she saw the plate was empty, she said:

"So you didn't hold out after all?"

I pretended I didn't know what she was talking about.

"You've eaten your cake?"

"What if I did. It was my piece I ate, not yours."

"What are you so cross for? I didn't mean anything. I think you held out wonderfully as it was. You must have an awful strong character really. I could never have done it."

"What makes you think so?"

"I know I couldn't. In fact, if you'd left that cake lying there any longer, I believe I would have eaten it myself."

"So you think I have a strong character?"

"Of course you have."

I felt a little better after that and I decided to start all over again next day even though this one had been such a failure. I don't know

whether I would have succeeded if the weather had been fine, but luckily for me it rained all day, and the football field, as Shish-kin had predicted, was a mess and the game was called off. Since no one else was playing I didn't want to play either. Funny the way people are made! You'll be sitting at home thinking about the others out on the field and you'll begin feeling awfully sorry for yourself. Poor me, here I am moping all by myself while the others are having a wonderful game! But if you're at home and you know that everyone else is at home too and nobody is playing, you don't feel sorry for yourself a bit.

And that is how it was this time. Outside it was drizzling the way it does in the autumn, and I sat at home quite comfortably doing my lessons. Everything went fine until I got to arithmetic. I decided that there was no sense in giving myself a headache over it when I could go to any of the boys and get them to help me.

So off I went to Alik Sorokin. He's the best at arithmetic in our group. He always gets 5's.

I found him playing chess all by himself.

"I'm awfully glad you've come," he said. "We can have a game of chess."

"I didn't come to play chess. I want you to help me with my arithmetic."

"Arithmetic? Sure I'll help you. But the arithmetic can wait. I'll explain it all to you in a jiffy. Let's have a game first. It will do you good to play chess. Chess helps you with mathematics."

"Bosh!" I said.

"It's the honest truth. Why do you think I'm so good at arithmetic? Because I play chess."

"All right, then, let's play," I said.

We set out the pieces and began playing. But it didn't take me long to see I'd never be able to play with him. He's the kind that gets terribly excited over the game, and every time I made a false move he got angry and began shouting at me. ′

"Hey, what are you doing? Is that the way to play? What a move!"

"What's wrong with it?" I asked.

"Nothing, except that I take your pawn."

"Then take it, for goodness' sake, but stop yelling at me!"

"How can one help yelling when you play so stupidly!"

"What do you care?" I said. "You'll only win sooner!"

"I like beating good players, not dummies like you."

"So I'm a dummy, am I?"

"Something like that."

He kept on making the same sort of nasty remarks until he won, and then he said:

"Let's have another game."

By this time I simply had to beat him just to take him down a peg or two.

"All right," I said, "only you promise not to shout, because if you do, I'll stop playing and go home."

So we began another game. This time he didn't shout, but since he couldn't keep his mouth shut, he kept chattering like an ape and making fun of me.

"I see!" he'd say in a nasty way. "So that's how we're playing, is it? Hm! Hm! We're very smart this time, aren't we! Well, well, well!"

It was disgusting.

I lost that game, too, and I don't remember how many more.

After that we turned to my arithmetic. But here again his nasty character came out. He simply couldn't explain anything without losing his temper.



"But it's as easy as pie! Even a baby could understand it! What's so difficult about it? I'm surprised at you. Fancy not being able to tell when to add and when to subtract! We learned that in the Third. You act as though you'd dropped from the moon."

"Listen," I said, "if you can't explain without making a fuss, I'll go to someone else."

"I am explaining, but you simply won't understand!"

"You're not explaining at all! You're just showing off. What's the moon got to do with it, I'd like to know!"

"All right, don't get angry, I'll try and make it simple for you."

But it was no use. I spent the whole afternoon with him but I didn't get any real help from him at all. And what made it worse was that I didn't manage to beat him at chess even once. If only he wasn't such a conceited ass, I wouldn't have minded. But now I simply had to beat him, and so after that I went to

him every day for help with my arithmetic and we spent hours over the chess-board.

Little by little I learned to play, and sometimes I actually managed to win a game. True, it didn't happen very often, but when it did I was terribly pleased, in the first place because when he saw he was losing he'd stop chattering like an ape, and secondly, he'd get terribly nervous—he'd keep jumping up and sitting down again and holding his head. It was comical to watch him. I never get upset when I lose a game, but I don't get any pleasure out of seeing my partner lose either. But Alik is just the opposite: he can never hide his joy when he wins, and when he loses he's ready to tear his hair. I was so anxious to learn to play chess properly that I made Lika play with me, and whenever Dad had time I'd get him to play too. One day Dad told me he had bought a book on chess some time ago. It ought to be somewhere in the house. If I wanted to learn to play properly, I ought to read it, he said. I hunted all over for the book

and finally found it at the bottom of a trunk where we kept our old books. At first I thought I'd never be able to understand anything, but when I started to read I saw that it was quite simple really. It said that in chess, like in war, you have to try and seize the initiative as soon as possible, to move your pieces forward and break through your opponent's defences and attack his king. It told you how to begin a game, how to prepare an attack, how to defend yourself and all sorts of other important things.



I spent quite a few days reading it, and the next time I went to Alik, I won several games. Alik was so surprised that for once he didn't know what to say. He couldn't understand what had happened. Pretty soon I was playing so well that he could not win a single game, not even by chance. Now the tables were turned.

We played so much chess that very little time was left for arithmetic, and Alik could only explain hurriedly, which made it even hazier than before. I had learned to play chess but I didn't notice that it helped much with my arithmetic, because I was still way behind with that subject. So I decided to stop playing chess altogether. In any case, I was tired of it, and I didn't enjoy playing with Alik any more. So one day I told him I was through with chess.

"You're crazy!" he said. "You've got a real gift for chess. You may grow up to be a famous chess-player one day if you keep at it!"

"Gift nothing," I said. "I got it all out of a book!"

"What book?"

"A text-book on chess. I can let you have it if you're interested. Read it and you'll be playing just as well as me in no time."

Alik was so anxious to get that book that he went straight home with me. He took it and ran back home at once to read it. As for me, I made up my mind not to play any more chess until I had improved my arithmetic.

Chapter Seven



VOLODYA, our Pioneer Leader, said it was time we had a school concert. Everybody was very enthusiastic about the" idea. Some of the boys promised to recite. Others decided to give a gymnastic display ending up with a pyramid. Grisha Vasilyev said he would give a selection on the *balalaika,* and Pavlik Kozlovsky was going to dance the *hopak.* But it was Vanya Pakhomov and Igor Grachyov who came out with the best idea of all. They proposed staging a scene from Pushkin's poem *Ruslan and Ludmilla,* the one where Ruslan fights the Ogre's head. The selection was in our *Russian Reader,* and we

had just read it. Igor Grachyov said he would make the Ogre's head out of plywood and paint it to look as hideous as possible, and he would hide behind it and speak the lines. Vanya would be Ruslan. He would make himself a wooden spear to fight the head with.

Shishkin was dying to do something for the concert, and he got me to go with him to Olga Nikolayevna and ask her to let us take part in the performance too. But she refused.

"You can't take part until you have improved your marks," she said.

All the boys began learning their parts and rehearsing them on the stage, and Shishkin and I hung about in the hall watching them enviously. Igor used up a whole sheet of plywood for the Ogre's head. He made the lower jaw separate and hinged it on so that the mouth would open. Then he painted the whole thing, making the eyes pop out in a terrifying way. When he hid behind it and roared his lines, making the jaw move up and down, it really looked as if the head was alive. And it

was awfully exciting to see Vanya as Ruslan jumping at it with his spear, and when the head blew at him he leapt back as if a gust of strong wind (the Ogre's breath) had swept him away!

One day Shishkin got a wonderful idea.

"I read *Ruslan and Ludmilla* again last night," he said to me, "and it says Ruslan rode a horse, but in our performance he is on foot."

"Of course he is. Where would he get a horse?" I said. "And even if he could find one, he wouldn't be able to get it on to the stage."

"I have an idea," he said. "You and I can be the horse.

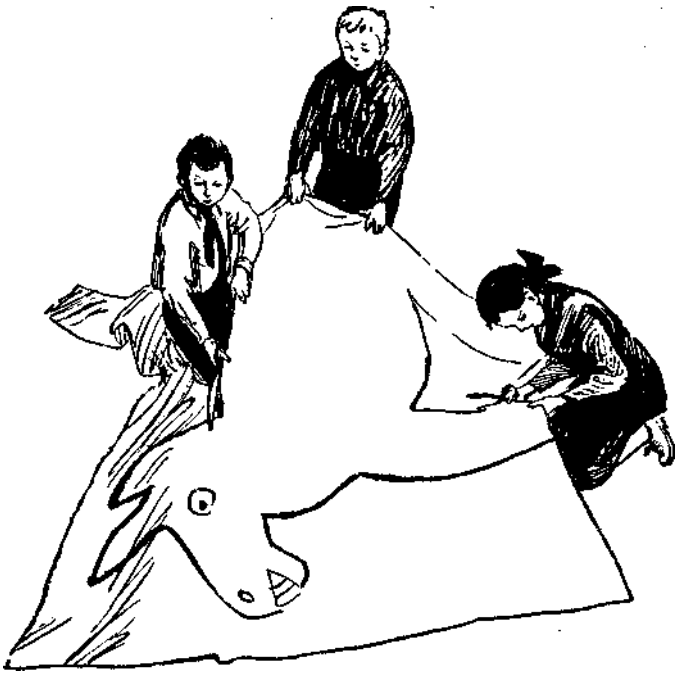
"How could you and me be a horse!"

"I have a *Games and Jokes* magazine at home and it tells you how two boys can act a horse on the stage. You make a sort of horse's skin out of a big piece of cloth—a proper horse with the head in front and the tail behind, and the legs, and everything. Then I get inside the skin in front and stick my head into the horse's head, and you get in at the back, bend over and

hold on to my waist, so your' back is the horse's back. See? The horse has four legs and so have we between us. You just have to do everything I do and there's your horse!"

"But how are we going to make the skin?" I said. "If we were girls we might be able to sew it. All girls know how to sew. They teach them in school."

"You can ask your sister Lika to help us."



I told Lika all about it and asked if she'd help us. "Of course I will," she said, "but you have to get me the cloth." That stumped us at first, but after a while Shishkin discovered an old mattress someone had thrown away in their attic. We shook all the insides out and brought it to Lika. Lika looked it over and said it would do. She ripped it apart and laid the two pieces of cloth on the floor, one on top of the other, and told us to draw the horse on the top piece. We got a piece of chalk and drew a big horse with head and legs and everything. Lika cut it out with a scissors and then sewed the two cloth horses together along the back and head. Kostya and I got needles and helped her with the sewing. The legs gave us an awful lot of trouble because each leg had two seams.

Kostya and I kept pricking our fingers. At last it was finished. The next day we got hay and some tow and went to work on our horse again. We stuffed the head with hay so it would hold better and out of the tow we made a tail and a mane. When that was all done,

Kostya and I crawled into the horse's skin through a hole left open in the belly and tried Walking. Lika had a good laugh watching us. She liked our horse very much, only she said it was a bit on the thin side, and that we must get some wadding and stuff it in the places that sagged. She said if we painted it no one would tell it was made out of cloth. While Lika sewed in bits of wadding here and there, Shishkin went home and brought some floor polish, and we dyed the cloth with it and the result was a lovely sorrel horse. Then we painted in the eyes, nostrils, and mouth, and hooves. It was Lika's idea to add ears, because the head didn't look right without them.

After that we crawled inside again. Kostya made a noise exactly like a horse whinnying, and Lika clapped her hands and laughed so much I thought she'd split her sides.

"It's exactly like a real horse!" she cried.

We tried walking about the room and prancing a bit. It must have looked all right because Lika never stopped laughing. Then

Mum came, and she laughed too when she saw us, and so did Dad when he came home from work.

He asked us what we had made it for, and we told him there was going to be a concert in the school and Kostya and I were going to play a horse.

"A concert? That's fine!" Dad said. "Excellent way of keeping you youngsters out of mischief. Gives you something useful to do besides. You must let me know when your concert comes off. I'll be sure to come."

Then we went to Shishkin's place to show our horse to his mother and aunt.

"What if Dad comes to the concert and they don't let us take part?" I said.

"We won't say anything to anybody," said Shishkin. "We'll come earlier and hide behind the stage, and just before Vanya is due to go on, we'll tell him we've got a horse for him." :

"Good!" I said. "That's what we'll do."

Kostya and I waited so impatiently for the performance that we couldn't do our lessons

properly. Every day we tried on the horse's skin and walked about just to keep in training. Lika kept adding bits of wadding here and there so that finally our horse began to look sleek and smooth. At first the ears were a bit too floppy but Kostya got the idea of putting wires inside that made them stick up properly. He also thought of attaching strings to the ears to make them twitch the way a horse's ears do.

At last the long-awaited day arrived.

We smuggled the skin into the school and hid it behind the stage. Then we hunted up Vanya, and Kostya took him aside.

"Listen, Vanya," he said, "when you're ready to go on to the stage to fight the Ogre's head, you'll find a horse waiting for you in the wings. You get on it and ride on to the stage on horseback just like it says in the book."

"A horse? What sort of a horse?"

"Never you mind. It's a good horse. You just climb on and it'll do the rest."

"I don't know," said Vanya doubtfully. "We didn't rehearse with a horse."

"Silly ass!" said Shishkin. "It'll be ten times better with a horse! In the poem Ruslan rides a horse, doesn't he? Besides the poem says:

'Here I come galloping like the wind. . . .' How can he gallop if he's not riding a horse? And the picture in our reader shows Ruslan on horseback."

"All right," said Vanya. "I didn't like the idea of being a knight without a horse anyway."

"But don't tell anyone about it or you'll spoil everything," Kostya warned him.

"All right, I shan't say a word."

And so when the audience began to gather, Kostya and I stole backstage, got the skin ready and waited for the show to begin. The boys were running back and forth giving the final touches to the scenery. At last the bell rang and the concert began. We had a good view of the stage from where we stood. We heard all the recitations and saw the gymnastics. I liked the gymnastics especially.

The boys did the exercises very neatly, keeping perfect time to the music. Their two weeks' training hadn't been wasted. '

Then the curtain closed and the stage hands set up the Ogre's head with its movable jaws, and Igor Grachyov took up a position behind it. Presently Vanya came backstage. He wore a shining helmet made of cardboard and silver paper, and carried a spear made of wood painted silver.

' "Well, where's your horse?" he asked.

"Just a minute."

We crawled into the skin and there was the horse.

"Come on, climb up," I said gaily.

But when Vanya climbed on and plumped himself down on my back, I began to feel sorry for horses. Poor things, they don't have it easy in this world. I thought my back would break, and I grabbed hold of Shishkin's waist for support. At that moment the curtain went up. '

"Gee-up!" cried Ruslan (that's Vanya), and we trotted right on to the stage. The boys

roared with laughter when they saw us. Our horse was certainly a success. We made straight for the Ogre's head.

"Whoa! Whoa!" hissed Ruslan. "Where do you think you're going! You nearly rammed the Ogre. Get back!"

We backed up a bit and the audience laughed.

"Don't do that, you apes!" Vanya hissed. "Turn round and go to the centre of the stage. I've got to recite my monologue."

We did as we were told, and Vanya started reciting in a sepulchral voice:

Oh, battle-field!
O'erstrewn with bleached bones. . . .

While he droned on in that sickening voice elocutionists put on, Shishkin amused the audience by pulling the string and making the horse wiggle its ears. At last the monologue was finished and Vanya whispered: "Now get over to the head."

We turned and made for the head. When we were within five paces of it Shishkin started to snort and rear. I also began to kick to show that the horse was scared of the monster. Ruslan spurred on his horse, in other words, he kicked me in the ribs with his heels. We moved closer to the head, and Ruslan started tickling its nostrils with his spear. The head opened its mouth wide and let out such a sneeze that we leapt back and swung round and round as if we had been blown away by a gust of wind. Ruslan nearly fell off, and Shishkin stepped on my foot and it hurt so much I started to limp. Vanya gave me some

more nasty digs in the ribs, and we galloped up to the head, which blew at us and swept us aside again. We repeated this several times until I couldn't stand it any more. -'

"Hey, you! Stop it!" I pleaded. "My foot hurts bad enough as it is!"

So we galloped over to the head for the last time and Vanya gave it such a crack with his spear that the paint came flying off. The head fell over and the horse went limping off the stage as the curtain fell. The audience clapped like mad. Vanya jumped off his horse and ran out to take his bow like a real actor.

"We can't let him get all the credit," says Shishkin. "Let's go and take a bow too."

When the horse trotted out on to the stage and bobbed its head up and down at the audience, the applause was terrific. The boys clapped and clapped, and we trotted off and came back for more until Volodya ordered the curtain rung down. We thought we'd be able to slip out unnoticed, but Volodya caught the horse by the ears.

"Come on, now, get out of there!" he said. "Who is it?" There was nothing for it but to climb out.

"So it's you?" said Volodya. "Who gave you permission to fool about like this?" "It was a good horse, wasn't it?" Shishkin said.

"The horse was all right, but you don't know how to behave on the stage. All the time Vanya was reciting his monologue, your horse was fidgeting and shuffling its feet. Where did you see a horse do that?"



"I'd like to see you standing still with a lump like Vanya sitting on your back," I said. "He must weigh a ton."

"Well, when you're on the stage you've got to stand still. And then just when Ruslan was reciting: 'Oh, battle-

field, o'erstrewn with bleached bones!' everyone started laughing. At first I couldn't make out what they were laughing at, and then I saw the horse was wiggling its ears!"

"Well, horses always wiggle their ears when they listen, don't they?" said Shishkin.



"What was he listening to?"

"To the monologue, of course."

"It wouldn't have been so bad if he had just twitched his ears now and then, but you made him wave them about as if he was swatting flies."

"I daresay I overdid it a little," Shishkin admitted. "I must have pulled the string too hard."

"Overdid it is putting it mildly. You had no right to be on the stage in the first place."

We felt very badly about the whole business. We were sure we were in for more scolding from Olga Nikolayevna, but she didn't say anything and somehow that made me feel worse still. She must have decided that Shishkin and I were hopeless and that it wasn't even worth while scolding us.

What with the concert and all that chess I had been playing I neglected my lessons, and when we got our report cards for the first quarter, I found I had 2 out of 5 for arithmetic.

To tell the truth I expected I'd have a low mark, but I kept hoping that by the end of the quarter I'd manage to catch up somehow. But it went and ended before I knew it.

Shishkin had 2 for Russian.

"Why the devil must they give out the report cards just before the holidays? Now my whole

holiday will be ruined," I said to Shishkin on our way home.

"Why?"

"Because I'll have to show my card to Mum when I get home."

"I shan't show mine until after the holidays," he said. "Why should I spoil my mother's holiday?"

'"But you'll have to show it afterwards anyway," I said.

"Yes, but the holidays will be over by then, and it won't matter so much. Let them enjoy their holidays. I love my mother. I wouldn't want to make her feel bad."

"If you loved your mother, you would try to get good marks," I said.

"I don't see you getting such high marks!"

"Not yet, but I shall."

"Well, so will I."

We dropped the subject, and I made up my mind to follow Shish-kin's example and not show my report card until the holidays were over. After all, they don't always give out the

report cards before the holidays, so I wouldn't be doing anything wrong.

Chapter Eight



T LAST the day we had all been looking forward to for so long arrived—November the Seventh, the anniversary of the Great October Revolution. I woke up very early and ran to the window. The sun was not up yet, but it was already light. And the sky was as blue as blue. There were red flags and portraits of Lenin and Stalin on all the houses. I felt as happy and excited as if spring had come again. I don't know why I always feel so wonderful on

November the Seventh. Somehow it makes you think of all the nicest things that ever happened to you, and you long to grow up quickly, to be strong and brave and do all sorts of heroic deeds like penetrating into the heart of the taiga forests, or climbing up to the top of high mountains no one has climbed before, or flying an aeroplane in the blue sky, or burrowing deep underground for iron ore and coal, or building canals to water the deserts, or planting forests, or doing Stakhanovite work in a factory, or inventing some wonderful machines so that Mum and Dad would be proud of you,, and Olga Nikolayevna too.

Those are the sort of things I often dream of doing. And Dad says there is no reason why they should only be dreams, because in our country there is no limit to the wonderful things you can do if you want to badly enough and if you work hard at your lessons. And that's because a long, long time ago on November the Seventh we drove out the capitalists who oppressed the people, and now

everything in the country belongs to the people. That means everything belongs to me because I am the people too.

I got lots of presents that day. Dad gave me a magic lantern with slides. Mum gave me skates and Lika gave me a compass. I gave Lika a box of paints. Then Dad took Lika and me to his factory and from there we went to the demonstration with all the workers from the factory. The bands played and everyone sang. Lika and I sang too and it was great fun. Dad bought us balloons, a red one for me and a green one for Lika. And when we came to the biggest square in our town, Dad bought us two little red flags and we carried them past the tribune and through the whole square.

Then we went home and the guests began to come. Uncle Shura came first. He was carrying two parcels, and Lika and I guessed that he must have brought us presents too. But first Uncle Shura asked us how we had been behaving. We said we had been good.

"Do you obey your mother?"

"Yes," we said.

"And how are you getting on at school?"

"Fine," said Lika.

And I also said: "Fine."

He had a wonderful building set for me and a box of bricks for Lika.

Then Aunt Lida and Uncle Seryozha came, and after them Aunt Nadya and Uncle Yura, and, later on, Aunt Nina. They all asked me how I was getting on at school. I told them that I was doing quite well, and they all gave me presents. Lika also had a whole heap of presents. But somehow the more presents I got the worse I felt. My conscience began to bother me, because I had been telling everyone that I was doing well at school. That horrid 2 for arithmetic wouldn't give me any peace. I thought about it for a long time and finally made a solemn vow to turn over a new leaf in real earnest and never to let such a thing happen to me again. After I had come to that decision, my heart began to feel lighter, and I gradually livened up.

The next day, November 8th, was also a holiday. I went to see some of the boys from our class, and some of them came to see me. We played all sorts of games, and in the evening we put on a magic lantern show. When I went to bed, I piled all my presents on a chair next to my bed. Lika did the same, and the two coloured balloons we had marched with in the demonstration floated against the ceiling. They looked lovely up there.

When I woke up the next morning, the balloons were on the floor. They had shrunk to half their size. The gas inside had escaped, and they couldn't fly any more.

I didn't know how to tell Mum about that 2 when I came home from school. I didn't say anything until she asked for the report card herself. I pulled it out of my satchel without a word and gave it to her. Of course she pounced on the 2 right away.

"Just what I expected," she said, frowning. "That's what comes of playing games all the time instead of doing your lessons. And all

because you refuse to listen to your elders. How many times have you been told to do your lessons early instead of running out to play until you're exhausted. But it's no use talking to you. Do you want to be left behind for another year?"

I said I would work harder at my lessons from now on and that I would never, never have another 2 in my card again. But Mum only shrugged her shoulders. You could see she didn't believe I would keep my promise. I asked her to sign the card so I could take it back to my teacher, but she said:

"Oh, no. Your father will have to see it too."

That was a blow! I had hoped Mum would sign it because then I wouldn't have to show it to Dad, but now I would get a nice earful from him. I felt so miserable I hadn't the heart to do my lessons.

"I might as well wait till I get my telling-off from Dad," I thought. "I can do my lessons afterwards."

At last Dad came home from work. I waited till he had had his supper because he is always in a better mood then. Then I laid my report card on the table so that he could see it. It didn't take him long to notice it. He picked it up and examined it.

"You're a fine one!" he said when he saw the 2. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself! What will your classmates think of you?"

"I'm not the only one who got a 2," I said.

"Who else is there?"

"Shishkin."

"Must you take an example from Shishkin? Is Shishkin such a shining light?" ′ ′

"He isn't a light at all."

"You ought to work hard and get good marks and help Shishkin to do the same. I'm sure neither of you likes being behind the others."

"Of course we don't," I said. "I'm going to turn over a new leaf and work harder."

"You've said that before."

"Yes, but this time I mean it."

"Very well, we shall see how you keep your word."

Dad signed the card and said no more about it. I was even a bit disappointed. I had expected a long lecture, but it looked as if Dad felt that it was no use wasting time talking to me because I never keep my promises anyway. That only made me all the more determined to show that I *can* keep my word. I was sorry we had no arithmetic homework that day because I was so anxious to turn over a new leaf that I am sure I would have solved my problems all by myself. The next day I had a talk with Shishkin about it. "Well, did you catch it from your mother for that 2?" I asked him. "Didn't I! And from Aunt Zina besides. I don't see why she had to butt in. She's always saying: 'Wait, one of these days I'm going to take you in hand!' But when is she going to do it, I'd like to know! She said she would check my homework every evening. But she only did it once or twice, and since she joined that drama circle she's never home in the evenings at all. She

kept putting it off from day to day, and for a long time she didn't look at my books at all. And then suddenly one evening she says: 'Let me see your copy-books. I'm going to check your homework.' And of course I had nothing to show because I wasn't used to having anyone check me any more. But that sort of thing only happens once in a blue moon. Most evenings she's at the drama circle or the theatre."

"Well, she has to go to the theatre if she's studying in a theatre school, hasn't she?" I said.

"I'm not saying she hasn't," he said. "Mother goes to evening school too, but she never threatens to 'take me in hand.' She simply tells me I ought to do better at school, and even when she does get angry with me I don't mind. But I do mind when Aunt Zina says these things, because if a person undertakes to do something, he ought to do it instead of just talking about it. For all she knows I may be waiting all this time for her to take me in hand

and doing nothing myself. I can't help it, that's the sort of character I have."

"You're just shifting the blame on to somebody else," I said. "You should try and take yourself in hand."

"What about you? Anyone would think you were getting such good marks!"

"Not yet, but I shall," I said.

"Well, so will I," Shishkin replied.

That day our gym teacher, Grigori Ivanovich, told us that our gymnasium had been equipped for basket-ball, and said we could form a team if we wished. We were all very pleased to hear it and signed up at once. Shishkin and I wanted to join the team too, but Grigori Ivanovich wouldn't take us.

"Only those who have good marks can join," he told us.

Shishkin was terribly upset. He had been looking forward to playing basket-ball for a long time, and now all the other boys would be playing and we would be left out in the cold. I didn't mind so much because I had already

made up my mind to make a better showing in class, so I knew I'd soon be allowed to join the team.

After lessons we had a class meeting. Olga Nikolayevna said that many of us had begun to do better. The first Pioneer group was the best. They had not a single 2 and only two 3's. She said that when they had got rid of those 3's they would have reached the target they set at the last meeting—to work foixnothing less than 4's. Our group, she said, was the worst, because there were still two 2's, mine and Shishkin's.

"You see," said Yura, "we're at the bottom of the class again! We've got to do something about it."

"It's all because of those two," said Lenya Astafyev, pointing to me and Shishkin. "What's the matter with you fellows? You're disgracing the whole group! All the others are trying hard, but you don't care what marks you get. Why don't you do something about it,

Maleyev?" Then the rest of them pounced on me.

"What's the matter with you? Don't you know you've got to study better?"

"I don't know what you're making such a fuss about!" I said.

"I've already decided to do better, so there's no use going over all that again."

"It's not enough to make resolutions, you've got to show results," said Alik Sorokin. "Look at your marks!"

"Those marks are for last quarter. I didn't make my decision until the day before yesterday."

"Some excuse! As if you couldn't have decided earlier." "Now then, boys, you mustn't quarrel," said Olga Nikolayevna. "Those who are lagging behind must be helped. You have several good pupils in your group. You must assign someone to help Shish-kin and Maleyev."

Vanya Pakhomov offered to help me. "I'll help Shishkin," said Alik Sorokin. "May I?" "Of

course," said Olga Nikolayevna. "I like to see you boys volunteering to help one another."

After the meeting Olga Nikolayevna called Shishkin and me to the teachers' room and had a long talk with us. She told us that we were not taking enough pains with our homework or spending enough time on it. And that was why we weren't making progress. We didn't take the trouble to remember what we learned, and so very little remained in our heads. She advised Shishkin to spend more time on his Russian exercises, to think over every word he wrote, and she told him to learn the grammar rules off by heart. She said he ought to read more, and told him that she was going to check his homework more carefully..,

"As for you, Vitya, you must study harder by yourself, she said. "I suppose you get your mother or your father to help you when you have difficulties?"

"No," I said. "I don't bother Dad any more. Why should I disturb him when he's working? I get one of the boys to help me."

"That's just the same. I meant that you must learn to do your homework by yourself. If you sit over your problems until you find the way to do them yourself, you will learn something, but if you always get someone else to think for you, you will never learn. That's why we give you problems to solve. It's to teach you to think for yourself."

"All right," I said. "I'll try to do them myself from now on."

"That's a good boy. It's only when you simply can't do a problem, however hard you try, that you should ask for help, either from one of your classmates or from me."

"No," I said. "I think I will be able to do it myself, and if I can't, I'll go to Vanya."

"I am sure you can do any problem if you really try," said Olga Nikolayevna.

Chapter Nine



As SOON as I got home I set to work I was filled with such resolution that I was quite surprised at my self. I began with the hardest les sons, just as Olga Nikolayevna had said, leaving the easier ones for afterwards. We had an arithmetic problem to solve that day, and without more ado I opened up my arithmetic book and read the problem:

"A shop had 8 saws and 3 times as many axes. It sold half of the axes and 3 of the saws to one team of carpenters for 84 rubles. The remaining axes and saws were sold to another

team of carpenters for 100 rubles. How much did one axe and one saw cost?"

I couldn't make head or tail of it at first, so I read it once more and then again. After a while I began to see that the people who thin! up problems go out of their way to mix everything up, just to make it harder for the pupil, I suppose. "A shop had 8 saws and 3 time as many axes." Why couldn't they have said 24 axes and be don with it? Because if there were 8 saws and 3 times as many axes, and one could see there must have been 24 axes. And the next thing: "It sold half of the axes and 3 of the saws to one team of carpenters for 84 rubles." As if they couldn't have put it simply: "It sold 12 axes. Because if there were 24 axes, half of them makes 12. All that was sold for 84 rubles. Then it goes on to say that the "remaining saw and axes were sold to another team of carpenters for 100 rubles." Now, isn't that a silly way of putting it! If there were 24 axes altogether and they sold 12, that means 12 remained. And since

there were 8 saws to begin with and they sold 3 to one of the teams, that means the other team bought 5. Then why couldn't they say so instead of beating about the bush in that stupid way. And then they blame schoolboys for not being able to solve such problems!

I wrote out the problem in, my own way, to make it look a little more sensible, and this is what I got:

"A shop had 8 saws and 24 axes. It sold 12 axes and 3 saws to one team of carpenters for 84 rubles, and 12 axes and 5 saws to another team of carpenters for 100 rubles. How much did one saw and one axe cost?"

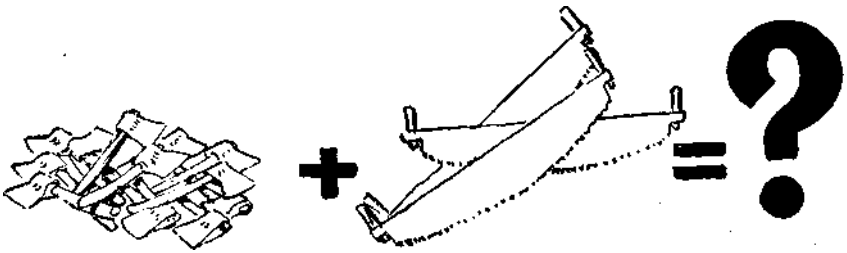
After I had rewritten it, I read it again. It was a little shorter now, but I still didn't have the least idea how to begin solving it, because the figures kept getting mixed up in my head so that I couldn't think straight. I decided to cut it down a bit so there should be fewer figures. After all, it didn't really matter how many of those saws and axes the shop had if

they sold all of them. So I cut down the problem and this was the result:

"One team of carpenters bought 12 axes and 3 saws for 84 rubles. Another team bought 12 axes and 5 saws for 100 rubles. How much did one axe and one saw cost?"

The problem was shorter now. But I wasn't satisfied. I wanted *to* make it shorter still. After all, what did it matter who bought those saws and axes? The important thing was how much they paid for them. I thought and thought and finally wrote out the problem this way:

"12 axes and 3 saws cost 84 rubles.



"12 axes and 5 saws cost 100 rubles.

"How much does one axe and one saw cost?"

I couldn't make it any shorter than that, and so I started thinking tow to solve it. At

first I thought that if 12 axes and 3 saws cost 84 rubles, then you had to add the axes and saws together and divide 84 by the result. I added 12 axes and 3 saws and got 15. Then I tried to divide 84 by 15, but it didn't come out because there was something left over. I saw I had made some mistake and tried to find another way out. I added 12 axes and 5 saws and got 17, and I tried to divide 100 by 17, but again it didn't come out. Then I added the 24 axes and the 8 saws together and added up all the rubles and tried to divide the rubles by the axes and saws, but it didn't come out anyway. After that I subtracted the saws from the axes, and divided the rubles by the result, but it was no good. I tried adding the saws and axes separately and subtracting the axes from the money and dividing what was left by the saws. I don't know how many other things I tried but none of them worked. So I picked up my arithmetic book and went to Vanya Pakhomov.

"Listen," I said. "Here's a problem for you. If 12 axes and 3 saws cost 84 rubles, and 12 axes

and 5 saws cost 100 rubles, how much floes one axe and one saw cost? How do you do it?"

"How do you think it should be done?" he asked.

"I think you have to add the 12 axes and the 3 saws and divide 84 by 15."

"Why do you want to add the saws and the axes?"

"To find out how many there were altogether and then I divide 84 by the total and find out how much one cost."

"One what? One saw or one axe?"

"A saw, or an axe."

"But then they would both cost the same."

"But don't they?"

"Of course not. The problem doesn't say they cost the same. In fact, you're supposed to find out how much one axe cost and how much one saw cost. That means you mustn't add them together."

"It doesn't seem to make any difference whether you add the blinking things together or not, it doesn't work out anyway."

"That's because you're not doing it right."

"How do you do it then?"

"Use your brains."

"I've been doing nothing else for the last two hours!"

"Read the thing over again," said Vanya. "What does it say?"

"It says that 12 axes and 3 saws cost 84 rubles, and 12 axes and 5 saws cost 100 rubles."

"Well, don't you notice that the number of axes was the same both times, but there were two more saws the second time?"

"That's right."

"And the second team paid sixteen rubles more, didn't it?"

"I noticed that too. The first time they paid 84 rubles, and the second time, 100 rubles. A hundred minus 84 makes 16."

"Now, why do you think the second team paid 16 rubles more?"

"That's easy," I said. "They bought two more saws, so they had to pay 16 extra rubles."

"That means two saws cost 16 rubles, doesn't it?"

"That's right."

"Then how much does one saw cost?"

"Well, if two cost 16, then one costs 8."

"Well, there you are, now you know how much one saw cost."

"Pooh!" I said, "it's like falling off a house! Why didn't I see it myself?"

"Now you still have to find out how much one axe costs."

"Oh, that's nothing," I said. "12 axes and 3 saws cost 84 rubles. Three saws cost 24 rubles. Subtract 24 from 84 and you get 60. That means 12 axes cost 60 rubles, one axe cost 60 divided by 12, which makes 5."

I thanked Vanya and went home, feeling disgusted with myself for not having been able to solve such a simple problem without his help. But I decided I would do the next problem all by myself even if I had to sit over it for five hours.

The next day we had no arithmetic homework and I was very glad because it isn't much fun solving problems all the time.

"Good," I said to myself. "I'll have at least one day without arithmetic."

But as it happened, I didn't have any rest at all. I had just sat down to do my lessons when Lika pipes up:

"Vitya, we've got a problem here I simply can't solve. Do help me with it, please."

I took one look at the problem and went cold all over. What if I couldn't solve it either? Where would an elder brother's authority be then?

So I said: "I'm awfully busy just now, Lika. A whole pile of homework to do. Suppose you go out for a little walk. When you come back, I'll help you."

And I thought to myself: "I'll work out the problem while she's out, and by the time she comes back I'll be able to explain it to her."

"All right, I'll go and play with the girls," said Lika. "Yes, you go," I urged her. "Only

don't bother to come back too soon. You can stay out for a couple of hours, or even three for that matter. In fact, have a nice long walk."

As soon as she was gone, I picked up her book and read the problem over:

"A boy and a girl went to the woods to pick nuts. They picked a total of 120 nuts. The girl picked half as many as the boy. How many nuts did each of them pick?"

It looked so easy I felt like laughing. "Call that a problem?" I thought to myself. "You have only to divide 120 by 2, which is 60. That means the girl picked 60 nuts. To find out how many the boy picked you subtract 60 from 120, and you get 60. Whoa! Something wrong there. That would make them both pick the same amount, but the problem says the girl picked only half as many. I've got it, you divide 60 by 2, which makes 30. That means the boy picked 60 and the girl 30. I looked at the table of answers at the end of the book and it said: the boy 80, the girl 40.

"Now, wait a minute!" I said to myself. "How's that? I've got 30 and 60, and the book says 40 and 80." I read the problem once more. They picked 120 nuts altogether. If the boy picked 60 and the girl 30, that only makes 90, which is wrong. I did the sum all over again, and again I got 30 and 60. Why did the book say 40 and 80? I couldn't make head or tail of it.

I racked my brains. I read the problem over at least a dozen times, but I couldn't find out what the trouble was.

"Poor little kids in the Third," I thought. "Giving them problems even we in the Fourth can't solve."

I thought about the problem again. I felt terribly ashamed of myself for not being able to solve it. What would Lika say? I thought still harder, but nothing helped. My mind was a blank. I didn't know what to do. The problem said there were 120 nuts, and you had to divide them so that the boy had twice as many as the girl. If there had been some other

figures you might have done something, but with 120 and 2 you could add or subtract or multiply or divide until doomsday and you'd never get 40 and 80 anyhow.

In despair I started drawing a hazel-tree in the margin with 120 nuts on it and a boy and a girl standing underneath. As I drew I thought about the problem, only my thoughts kept drifting away in the wrong direction. At first I wondered how the boy managed to pick twice as many nuts as the girl, and then I guessed that he must have climbed up the tree while the girl picked from the lower branches. Then I started "picking" the nuts myself, that is I rubbed them out one after another and gave them to the boy and the girl, by drawing them in over their heads. Then it occurred to me that they must have put the nuts they picked in their pockets. I drew two side-pockets on the boy's jacket and one pocket on the girl's pinafore. I thought perhaps the girl had picked fewer nuts because she only had one pocket to put them in. I sat there staring at what I had

drawn: the boy had two pockets, and the girl had one, and gradually I began to see the light. I rubbed out the nuts I had drawn over their heads and shaded the pockets to make them look as if they were bulging with nuts. Now I had all the nuts shared out in three pockets—in the boy's two and the girl's one. And suddenly I felt as if a flash of lightning had lit up the sky. Why, of course, the 120 nuts must be divided by three! The girl would get one part, and the other two would be the boy's, and that would give him twice as many! I divided 120 by 3 and got 40. That was the girl's share. Then I multiplied 40 by 2 and that made 80 and there was the answer given at the back of the book! I nearly jumped for joy. I got up and ran to Vanya's house to tell him I had solved a problem all by myself.

As I was running down the street there was Shishkin coming towards me.

"Listen, Kostya," I said. "A boy and a girl went to the forest to pick nuts. They picked altogether one hundred and twenty, the boy

took twice as many as the girl. What would you do about that?"

"I'd punch that boy's nose for being so greedy."

"You chump! That's not what I mean at all. How do you divide the total so as to give him twice as many as she has?"

"I don't care how you divide it. Leave me alone! Why don't they share them equally and be done with it?"

"Don't be a fat-head. It's a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"An arithmetic problem."

"You and your problems," Shishkin shouted. "My guinea-pig has died, the one I bought the day before yesterday, and you bother me with your silly problems."

"I'm awfully sorry," I apologized. "I didn't know you were in mourning."

I ran on to Vanya's.

"Listen!" I said. "Here's a rum problem for you: A boy and, a girl picked 120 nuts. The boy took twice as many as the girl. To get the

answer you divide by 3, isn't that how you do it?"

"That's right," says Vanya. "The girl takes one part and the boy two parts, and that gives him twice *as* many as her."

"I solved it all by myself," I told him. "They tried to make it as complicated as possible, thought no one would be able to solve it. but I did."

"Good for you!"

"And from now on I'm going to do all my problems myself." "Yes, you ought to. It's always better that way. You get more out of it," says Vanya.

I ran back home. On the way I met Yura Kasatkin. "Listen, Yura," I said. "A boy and a girl went to the woods to pick nuts. . . ."

"Oh, they did, did they? You better tell me why you're running around instead of sitting at home and doing your lessons."

"But I am doing my lessons, honest I am!"

"Doing your lessons! Why, you're a disgrace to the class, you and that Shishkin of yours."

"But honest I'm studying. And Shishkin's guinea-pig died. Where are you off to?"

"I went over to your place to see how you were doing your lessons. But you were out."

"Yura," I said, drawing myself up. "I give you my word of honour I was doing my lessons. I did a problem all by myself and I just popped over to Vanya to tell him about it. You can come back with me and I'll show you."

We went back to my place and I showed him the problem about the nuts.

"Nuts!" said Yura. "We did those problems in the Third." "Yes," I said quickly. "I'm going over last year's arithmetic again to make sure I know it properly. You see, last year I didn't do so well at arithmetic and I want to make up for lost time."

"That's the ticket! It'll be much easier for you to catch up that way."

Yura went away. Soon Lika came home and I explained the problem to her. I drew a tree with nuts on the branches, and a boy with two pockets and a girl with one pocket.

"Oh, Vitya," said Lika, "you do make everything so marvellously clear! I would never have been able to work it out myself."

"It's as simple as ABC," I said. "Whenever you have any more trouble with your problems, just ask me. I'll show you how to do them in a jiffy."

Funny how quickly a fellow can change! I had always been the one who needed helping and here I was helping others. And the funniest thing was that I was still getting 2 out of 5 for arithmetic!

Chapter Ten



HEN I woke up the next morning and looked out of the window, it Was winter. The back-yard was covered with snow. Everything was white— the ground and the roofs, and the trees with the snow on every branch looked like frothy lace. I would have liked to rush off to the rink with the skates Mum had given me, but I had to go to school; and after school I sat down right away to do my homework and when that was finished, I did a lot of problems from Lika's arithmetic book.

I had made up my mind to go through last year's arithmetic from beginning to end. Most of the problems were as easy as shelling peas, but there were some that gave me quite a bit of trouble. But now I didn't mind that. I had made it a rule to solve each problem before moving on to the next. Of course I couldn't go through the book in a day. As a matter of fact I spent about two or three weeks over it. That left only the evenings for skating. But it was worth it, because after I had solved all the problems in last year's arithmetic book, I got so clever that I could do any problem for the Fourth class without anyone helping me. I found that our arithmetic book had many problems that were very much like the ones in the Third-class book, only a little harder. But I wasn't afraid of hard problems any more. In fact the harder they were the more I enjoyed them. You can't imagine what a relief it was not to be scared of arithmetic as I used to be. It was a load off my mind. Olga Nikolayevna was pleased with me and gave me good marks. The

other boys stopped bothering me about lagging behind, and Mum and Dad were glad to see how well I was getting on. I was accepted in the basket-ball team and began playing with the other boys for two hours every other day. And when there was no basket-ball I skated, played ice-hockey or skied with the boys. Oh, there was plenty to do!

As for Shishkin, instead of trying to buck up with his school work he had gone and bought himself a heap of guinea-pigs, white mice, turtles and what not. He had three hedgehogs! Now, what would one boy want with three hedgehogs? He spent all his time with his animals, feeding them and taking care of them, but they were always getting sick and dying. And then there was Lobzik. Lobzik was a puppy. He was quite big for his age, but he was still very playful. He had a shaggy black coat and long floppy ears. Shishkin had found him on the street one day and the dog had followed him home.

So you see, Shishkin was far too busy to do his lessons. He would sit down to his homework only after his mother had reminded him twenty times over. The first thing she'd ask when she came home from work was:

"Have you done your lessons?"

"Not yet, but I shall in a minute."

"No, you sit down at once."

"Just a minute, Mum, I'll feed the turtle and then I'll do my lessons."

His mother would go off to the kitchen and Kostya would feed his turtle, and then he would remember that he had to make a cage for the guinea-pig, and he would start doing that. After a while his mother would come back into the room and find him fussing with his animals.

"When are you going to do your lessons?"

"In a minute, Mum."

"You said that half an hour ago. Get your books out!"

"Oh, Mum, let me finish the cage."

"It will take you three days to finish that cage. Stop it at once and get to work on your lessons."

"Oh, all right," he would say. "I'll finish it tomorrow. I'll just go and get some water for the hedgehogs."

After the hedgehogs had been attended to, he would have to look and see whether the other animals had enough water. Then he would discover that one of the hedgehogs had disappeared, and he'd start hunting for it all over the house. Half an hour later his mother would ask him about his lessons again.

"One minute," he'd say. "I must find that silly hedgehog first. I can't think where he could have got to."

And that went on from day to day. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. And when his mother wasn't around he wouldn't even think of doing his lessons. He kept putting them off until it was so late that he'd hardly have a chance to open his books when it was bedtime. Of course, he never learned anything properly.

Somehow, though, he managed to get 3's and now and again 4. But that happened very seldom. Russian was his worst subject, and I don't know what he would have done if I hadn't prompted him. There was no general prompting in our class any longer because no one wanted to get in the wall newspaper, but I kept it up for Shishkin's sake. After all, he was my friend. I must admit that it didn't do much good because on the days when we had dictation or composition he didn't come to school at all. Once Olga Nikolayevna told us that we would have dictation the next day. Shishkin pretended to be ill that morning. He told his mother he had a headache, and she allowed him to stay at home and said she would call a doctor as soon as she came home from work. But when she came home Shishkin said his head had stopped aching and that there was no need for a doctor. His mother wrote the teacher a note saying that she had kept Kostya home because he had not been well, and everything went off splendidly. The

next time we were supposed to have composition Shishkin got a headache again and his mother wrote another note to the teacher. When she came home and found Kostya well again, she was rather surprised but she didn't suspect anything. But when it happened a third time she began to get suspicious. At first Kostya wouldn't admit that he had been pretending, but when his mother said she would go to school and find out for herself, he confessed.

Naturally his mother was terribly angry when she heard that he had been deceiving her. That happened to be the very day Shishkin brought Lobzik home. Now, Shishkin's mother was always scolding him for bringing all sorts of animals home and fussing with them when he ought to be doing his lessons, so he had hidden Lobzik in the lumber-room. And it happened that just when his mother was scolding him for having deceived her about his illness, Lobzik walked

into the room. "What's this!" she cried. "It's . . . it's ... a dog."

"Who allowed you to bring a dog here? You've a whole menagerie in the house as it is. You waste all your time with those animals instead of doing your lessons. I've had enough of it! Take all those animals away at once! All of them—mice, rats, hedgehogs! And don't let me see that dog in here another minute!"

Poor Kostya saw it was no use arguing, so with tears in his eyes he took his beloved animals and distributed them among all the boys he knew. He gave them all away except one hedgehog which nobody wanted. He brought it to me and told me all that had happened at home. I didn't want to take the hedgehog either, because the mice he had given me had multiplied so much that the house was full of them and some of them had settled inside a chest of drawers. Besides, the hedgehog looked so droopy that I thought it must be ill. But Shishkin said it wasn't ill at all, it was simply getting ready to hibernate,

because all hedgehogs hibernate in winter. So I agreed to take it, and Shishkin said that in the spring-time when it woke up from its winter's sleep he would take it back again.

But he wouldn't part with Lobzik, and he decided to hide him in the attic. He made a bed for him next to the chimney and tied him by the collar to a rafter. It was cold in the attic but the chimney was warm, and so Lobzik didn't mind it so much. But I daresay the poor dog must have been pretty uncomfortable at times, especially when it was very cold outside because then the chimney would get terribly hot, so that he'd be practically frozen on one side and sizzling hot on the other. Kostya was afraid Lobzik's ears might get frost-bitten or that he'd catch pneumonia. He brought him food on the sly and spent all his spare time with him so Lobzik wouldn't be lonely. When his mother was out, he would take him downstairs and play with him, and when it was time for his mother to come home from work, he would take him back upstairs again.

At first everything went fine, but one day he forgot to take Lobzik away in time, or perhaps his mother came home earlier than usual; at any rate, Shishkin was "caught red-handed," as they say.

"What! That dog here again?" shouted his mother. "So that's why you never have any time to do your lessons! Didn't I tell you to get rid of it?"

Well, poor old Shishkin had to admit he hadn't done what his mother had told him, and that Lobzik had been living in the attic all the time. He told her that he had fed Lobzik and taken care of him because he loved him very much and he didn't have the heart to turn a poor, homeless dog out in the snow.

"If you spent more time at your studies, I might let you keep Lobzik," his mother said. "But you simply won't get down to work."

"How can I when I'm worrying about Lobzik all the time?" said Shishkin. "Whenever I sit down to do my homework, all I can think of is

poor Lobzik up there all alone in the attic, and I feel so sorry for him I can't do my lessons."

His mother took pity on him. "All right," she said, "if you promise to do all your lessons right after school, I'll allow you to keep the dog."

Kostya promised.

"We'll see how you keep your promise," said his mother. "I am going to check your school work every day from now on."

Kostya told me the whole story on the way home from school the next day.

"Come home with me and I'll show you how I'm training Lobzik," he said. "You'll see what a clever dog he is. He's learned to hold a stick in his mouth already."

"I didn't think it needed much brains to do that," I remarked.

"Not for you," he says, "but for a dog it does."

We went to his place. Shishkin took the sugar bowl out of the cupboard and called Lobzik. As soon as Lobzik saw the sugar bowl, he jumped up and started wagging his tail.

You could see he knew the sugar bowl. Kostya shoved the stick under his nose and said:

"Now, hold this stick in your mouth, and you'll get a piece of sugar."

Lobzik turned away from the stick and eyed the sugar bowl.

"Never mind the sugar bowl, you hold the stick!" Kostya shouted at him.

But Lobzik was not a bit interested in the stick. Kostya forced open his jaws and thrust the stick between his teeth, but as soon as he let go, Lobzik opened his mouth, and the stick fell on to the floor.

"You bad dog, you've gone and forgotten all I taught you yesterday," Kostya scolded him. "We'll have to start all over again."

He put the stick in Lobzik's mouth again and told me to hold his nose so that he couldn't open his mouth. Lobzik held the stick in his mouth for a little while, and we gave him a piece of sugar as a re; ward. We did this many times until Lobzik seemed to realize that whenever he held the stick in his mouth he got

sugar, and he began holding the stick himself without our help. True, he dropped it as quickly as he could so as to get the sugar, but when he did that, Kostya wouldn't give him any sugar and made him do his trick over again. I got home very late that evening and saw I had broken my timetable. I made up my mind that when the summer holidays came I would get a dog and begin teaching it tricks, but I felt that until school ended I'd better not think of dogs because animal training takes a lot of time. I had only just started getting decent marks in arithmetic, and I would be sure to get 2's again if I didn't stick to my lessons. I decided a fellow had to learn things himself first before trying to teach dogs.

But Shishkin continued to spend all his free time with Lobzik. He taught him not only to hold the stick between his teeth but even to carry it sometimes.

Of course, Lobzik did not do all this for nothing, he got plenty of sugar for it, but I must say he worked hard. For a small lump of

sugar he would carry a stick all the way from here to Vokzalny Street. Shishkin said he could teach Lobzik to do all sorts of tricks. But he didn't try to teach him any more then because he is the sort of chap who soon gets tired of doing one thing and is always jumping from one thing to another.



Chapter Eleven

UR class had been wanting to go to the circus for a long time, and so you can imagine how excited we were when one day Volodya said he was going to get tickets for all of us. We had been to the pictures together many a time but not to the circus. I hadn't been to the circus for a long time myself, and it was so long since Shishkin had been that he had almost forgotten what it was like. He could only

remember having seen some huge animals, but whether they were lions, tigers or horses he couldn't say. He had been only a little boy then.

We were especially anxious to see a motor cyclist who rode round and round inside a metal cage shaped like a huge globe except, of course, that you could see through the bars of the cage. We had seen the posters and heard all sorts of exciting stories from people who had been there. They said that the motor cyclist goes round and round this cage at a tremendous speed. Then the bottom half of the cage is taken away and he is left riding round the top half—like in a bowl turned upside down—with nothing underneath him. They say that his terrific speed gives something they call centrifugal force, and that somehow keeps him from falling out. But if the speed dropped, there would be less centrifugal force and he would fall.

Some of the boys said we wouldn't all be going to the circus because Volodya wouldn't

be able to get so many tickets, and that only those who had 5's in all subjects would go. Some said everybody would go except Shishkin. And others said nobody would go because the tickets must all have been sold out long ago.

At last the tickets were booked and we all went, Shishkin as well. We arrived long before the performance began, but we didn't mind that. It's better to get there early because if you're late you mightn't get in at all. We found our places and had a good look at the arena. It was covered with a huge carpet. There were all sorts of ropes hanging down from the ceiling, and way up under the dome were the trapezes, rings, and rope ladders, and all sorts of other things. Gradually the circus began to fill up and before long it looked as if the whole town was there. I tried to count the people, but when I got to two hundred and thirty I lost count. I had just started all over again when dozens of lights flashed on so that it was as bright as daylight. Everything livened up and

looked very gay and holiday-like. I thought it would be ages before the performance began, and I was staring at the audience, when suddenly the cymbals crashed, the drums rolled, the violins squeaked, the trumpets blared and some acrobats came running on to the arena. They jumped in the air, turned somersaults, spun cart-wheels and tossed each other in the air with their hands. And they did it all so neatly and easily that everyone watching them felt like leaping on to the arena and turning somersaults with them. I jumped up too and wanted to run down on to the arena, but Olga Nikolayevna told me to sit down because I was disturbing the others. I looked around and saw all the people sitting in their seats, so I sat down as well. But just the same I had an awful hard time keeping still while those acrobats were performing. I could have watched them all evening, but too soon they ran off and an animal trainer with bears tool their place. Oh, what clever bears they were! They walked the tight rope, swung on

swings, and walked upright on moving barrels with out once missing their footing. And two of them actually rode bicycles!

The next to perform were jugglers, but they juggled with their feet—not with their hands. Lying on their backs, they spun coloured wooden cylinders round and round with their feet, tossed them back and forth from one foot to the other, and did things most people couldn't even do with their hands.

Then came the dogs. They jumped, turned somersaults, walked on their hind legs, pulled one another about in little carts, and played football. One dog was terribly brave: they hauled him way up to the very top of the circus right under the roof and he jumped down by parachute! Then the trainer announced that she had a dog that could count. They brought a stool and put a little black dog on it. The trainer put three blocks of wood in front of the dog and told it to count. How could the dog count when it couldn't even talk, we wondered. Well, the dog didn't talk, but it barked three

times. Everyone clapped loudly. The trainer praised the dog and gave it a piece of sugar. Then she put five blocks in front of it and said:

"Count!"

The dog barked five times.

The trainer pointed to figures printed on pieces of cardboard big enough for everyone to see, and each time the dog barked the right number of times.

"Now, what does two times two make?" the trainer asked.

The dog barked four times. :

"Three plus four?"

The dog barked seven times.

"Subtract four from ten!" ′. The dog barked six times.

We sat there gaping with wonder. So the dog could add and subtract as well!

After that there were more jugglers, two of them. They threw plates and all sorts of other things in the air and caught them again. They each juggled with four plates at once, and then they threw the plates to each other. It was

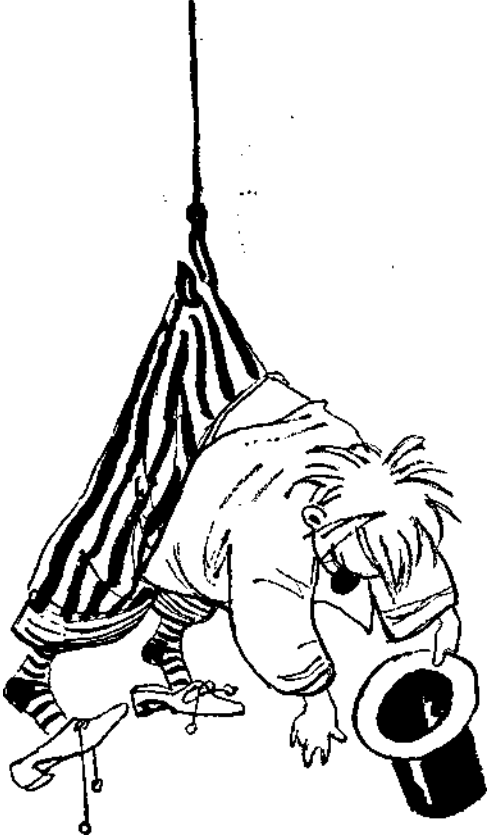
thrilling to watch the plates spinning back and forth as if they were alive! And not a single one was smashed.

Oh, and I nearly forgot the clown. He wore light-blue trousers, a yellow jacket and a green hat, and his nose was the reddest you ever saw. He did everything the performers did, only he made a mess of everything. When the jugglers left the arena he came out with three blocks of wood and started juggling with them. But he hadn't been long at it before he gave himself a nasty crack on the head with one of the blocks and ran away. And after the cycling bears he came out on a bicycle and rode straight into the barrier and his bicycle fell apart into little pieces. And when the equestrians came on he begged them to give him a horse too, but he was so afraid he'd fall off that he asked them to tie him by his belt to one of the safety ropes hanging from the ceiling. Then he tried climbing on to the horse's back by the tail, but the horse kicked. He wanted to run and get a ladder but he forgot he was tied to the safety

rope, so he begged one of the riders to give him a leg up. The rider pushed him with all his might from underneath, but instead of getting on the horse the clown somehow managed to get on the back of the rider. And the rider galloped all around the arena with the crazy fellow in the yellow jacket on his back.

"Hey there! You've backed the wrong horse!" shouted the rider.

At last they got the clown on the horse. The horse broke into a gallop and the clown fell off, but he didn't fall on to the ground because the rope held him. Instead he spread out his arms and legs and flew round and round the circus. He was a scream. He was one of those who simply couldn't do anything right. All he could do was make folks laugh.



The last number on the programme was the motor-cycle turn. We didn't go anywhere during the interval but stayed in our seats and watched all the preparations. First they assembled the top half of the cage. It was so big that twenty people could get inside easily, if not more. Then this top half was hoisted up under the roof, and the other half was put together on the arena. Inside the bottom half they put two motor cycles and two bicycles, and then it was all hoisted up and joined to the top half. The cage had a sort of hatch in the bottom with a rope ladder hanging from it.

At last the interval was over and the hall filled up again. The bright lights were

switched on, and the motor cyclists came on to the arena.

They were dressed in blue overall suits and had crash-helmets on their heads. There were three of them, two men and a woman. They bowed to the audience. Then the band struck up and they began climbing up the rope ladder. They climbed in through the hatch one after the other, closed the hatch from the inside and began riding bicycles round and round the cage. At first they rode slowly, and the bicycles made small circles at the bottom of the cage, but then they picked up speed and climbed higher and higher until they were horizontal and you just couldn't see why they didn't fall down. They took turns riding, and the woman rode just as well as the men.

Then one of them started his motor cycle. There was a frightful noise like a machine-gun going off, and the motor cyclist went tearing around the cage at a terrific speed. At some moments he was actually riding upside down, "looping the loop" from top to bottom of the

cage. We were afraid he would fall off his seat, but he didn't. The other motor cyclist started his bike and tore off after the first. What a row the two of them made! It was ear-splitting. The second motor cyclist came down to the bottom of the cage and stopped, but the first went on riding round the upper half of the cage.

And then the bottom half was lowered away with the motor cyclist still riding around in the upper half. When the lower half reached the ground, the second man and the woman got out. But the other motor cyclist was still riding round and round in the top part. We held our breath as we watched him. "What if his engine goes wrong?" I thought to myself. He simply had to keep on riding at top speed, because if he stopped there would be no centrifugal force and he would go crashing down.

At times I thought the engine was going to fail any minute, but it all ended all right. The lower part of the cage was hoisted up again, the cyclist slowed down and began circling in the bottom half. The circles grew smaller and

smaller. And finally 'he stopped, crawled out of the hatch and climbed down the ladder. The circus rocked with applause.

That was the end of the performance. Oh, how sorry we were that it was all over and how we hated to leave the circus! I made up my mind that when I grew up I would go to the circus every day. Well, not every day, perhaps, but at least once a week. I would never get tired of the circus!

Chapter Twelve



THE NEXT day I went over to Shishkin's to ask him how to feed the hedgehog because it seemed to have changed its mind about hibernating. It roamed about the room all night, rustling papers and keeping everyone awake. When I came into Shishkin's room, he was lying on the floor with his legs sticking in the air and a suit-case in his hands.

"What are you doing there on the floor?" I asked him. "I've decided to be a juggler," he said. "Watch! I'm going to juggle this suit-case with my feet."

He lifted up the suit-case and tried to balance it on his feet, but he couldn't do it.

"If only I could get it up," he panted. "Vitya, help me." I took the suit-case and laid it on his feet. He held it there for a little while, then he tried to turn it slowly, but it slid off and fell on to the floor.

"No," said Shishkin, "that's not the way. My boot-soles are too slippery. I must take my boots off."

He took them off, lay down on his back again and raised his legs. I put the suit-case on his feet again. "Ah, that's better!" he said.

He again tried to turn it with his feet and again the suit-case slipped off, but this time it went bang on to his stomach. Shishkin clutched at his tummy and groaned.

"Oh! Oh! That hurt! The suit-case is too heavy, I'd better try something lighter."

We searched high and low for something lighter, but we couldn't find anything suitable. So Shishkin took a cushion from the sofa,

rolled it up tight and tied it with string so that it looked like a chunk of sausage.

"This is nice and soft," he said. "Even if it falls it won't hurt." He lay down again on the floor and I put the "sausage-roll" on his upturned soles. He tried spinning it around but he couldn't.

"No," he said, "I'd better learn to catch it with my feet first, like that juggler in the circus. You throw it to me from over there and I'll catch it."

I took the cushion, went over to the other side of the room and let fly. It missed his feet and hit him right on the head.

"You ass," cried Shishkin. "Can't you see what you're doing? Aim for my feet, not my head!"

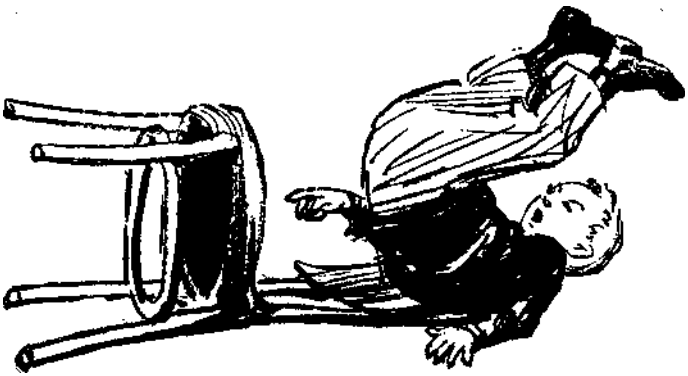
I got the cushion and took aim. He wriggled his feet wildly but he couldn't catch it. I threw the cushion about twenty times, and he managed to catch it once.

"See that?" he crowed. "Just like the circus!" I thought I'd have a shot at it myself. I lay

down on my back and tried catching the cushion with my feet, but I didn't manage even once. Finally I had to give it up because my back ached as if someone had been riding on it.

"All right," said Shishkin, "that will be enough cushion exercise for today. Now let's try with chairs."

He sat down on a chair and began to tip it slowly backward so as to balance it on the two back legs. The chair tilted farther and farther back until it tipped right over. Shishkin went flying on the floor and hurt himself. Then I tried it, but the same thing happened to me. I fell down and bumped my head.



"I suppose it's too soon for us to try tricks like that," said Kostya. "Let's try juggling with our hands instead."

"What shall we juggle with?"

"With plates, of course. Like they do in the circus."

He opened the cupboard and got out two plates.

"Now, you throw me yours and I'll throw you mine. As soon as I throw you my plate, you throw me yours. You catch mine and I'll catch yours."

"Look," I said, "we'll only break the plates and that'll be the end of it."

"That's true," he said. "You know what? Let's start with one plate. When we learn to catch one properly, we can try with two, then three and then four, and we'll be real jugglers."

We tossed the plate back and forth a couple of times, and then it fell and broke. We took another plate, and broke that one, too.

"That's no good," said Shishkin. "We'll break all the dishes this way, and we won't learn anything. Better try something unbreakable."

He went to the kitchen and found a small enamelled basin. We juggled for a while with the basin until somehow it hit the window. Lucky for us the glass wasn't smashed altogether; it was only cracked.

"That's too bad!" said Kostya. "We'll have to think of something to do about it."

"What if we put some sticking paper over the crack?" I suggested.

"No, that will only make it worse. Let's take a pane out of the passage window and put it in here and this one can go in its place. No one will notice a cracked window in the passage."

We loosened the plaster and tried removing the cracked pane. But the crack only got bigger and then the glass broke in two.

"Never mind," said Shishkin. "It'll do for the passage."

Then we took the glass out of the passage window, but it turned out to be a little bigger

than the one in the room and it didn't fit into the frame.

"We'll have to cut it," said Shishkin. "Do you know anyone who has a glass-cutter?" "I think Vasya Yerokhin has one."

We went to Vasya's, got his cutter and went back to the house. But the glass had disappeared.

"That's a fine thing," growled Shishkin. "What could have happened to it?"

At that moment he stepped on the glass. It had been lying on the floor. It made a nasty crunching noise under his boot.

"What idiot went and put the glass on the floor?" shouted Shishkin.

"You put it there yourself," I said.

"You mean you put it there!"

"No, I never even touched it. You oughtn't to have put it on the floor because you can't see glass when it's on the floor."

"Why didn't you say so at once if you're so smart?"

"I didn't think of it at the time."

"You didn't think of it! Now I'll get a nice scolding from mother all through you! What shall I do now? It's broken in five pieces. We'd better stick it together and put it back in the passage, and put the other one back here. It isn't so bad."

So we set about putting the worst pane in the passage window, but the pieces wouldn't hold. We tried sticking them, but it was cold and the paste wouldn't stick. So we gave it up and began putting the other pane back into its place, but Shishkin went and dropped one of the pieces and it smashed to bits. At that moment the door opened, and his mother came in. Shishkin did his best to explain what had happened.

"You're worse than a little baby," said his mother. "It's positively dangerous to leave you alone in the house. Heaven only knows what you'll do next."

"I'll put the glass in. You see if I don't," said Shishkin. "I'll collect all the pieces."



"You'll do nothing of the kind. Collect the pieces, indeed! I'll have to get a glazier. And what is this mess here?"

"I broke a plate," said Shishkin.

"0-oh!" was all his mother said. She closed her eyes, then put both hands to her head as if she had suddenly got a headache. Then she dropped her hands and said:

"Clear it away at once and get to work on your lessons! I am sure you haven't even thought of opening your books today."

Kostya and I picked up the broken chips and took them to the dust-bin.

"Your mother is awful soft-hearted," I said to him. "If I did anything like this at home, they would talk about it all day."

"Ph, don't worry, there'll be plenty of talk. Wait till Aunt Zina comes home. She'll give it to me. And you'll get it too."

I decided not to wait until Aunt Zina came home. I said good-bye and left.

The next morning I met Shishkin in the street. He said he wouldn't be going to school that day. He was going to the doctor. He didn't feel very well, he said. I went to school, and when Olga Nikolayevna asked why Shishkin hadn't come I told her I had met him in the morning on his way to the doctor.

"You ought to go and see him after school," said Olga Nikolayevna.

We had dictation that day. When I came home from school, I did my lessons and went off to visit Shishkin. His mother was already home. As soon as I came in, Shishkin began making signs to me, putting his finger to his lips and shaking his head. I saw that he wanted me to keep quiet about something, so I stepped out into the passage with him.

"Don't tell Mother I stayed away from school today," he said. "All right. But why didn't you come? What did they say at the medical centre?"

"They didn't say anything." "Why?"

"Oh, they've got a nasty, hard-hearted doctor there. I told him I was ill, but he said I was quite well. I told him I'd sneezed so many times that morning I thought my head would come off, and he said: "That's all right, there's nothing like a good sneeze for clearing your head.'"

"But perhaps you really weren't ill?"

"Of course I wasn't."

"Then why did you go to the doctor?"

"Well, I told Mother in the morning that I wasn't feeling well, so she said in that case I must go and see the doctor because she wasn't going to write any more notes to school for me. I'd missed enough school *as* it was."

"Why did you tell your mother you were ill if you weren't ill at all?"

"Blockhead! Didn't Olga Nikolayevna say we were going to have dictation today? What's the use of my going and getting 2!"

"But what are you going to do now? Tomorrow Olga Nikolayevna will ask why you didn't come to school."

"I don't know what to do. I suppose I won't go to school tomorrow either. If Olga Nikolayevna asks, you can tell her I'm ill."

"Look here," I said, "this is silly. You'd better own up and ask your mother to write a note."

"No, that won't do. Mother said she wouldn't write any more notes or else I might get in the habit of playing truant."

"But what else is there to do?" I said. "You can't stay away from school every day, can you? You tell your mother, she'll understand."

"All right, I'll tell her if I can get up enough courage."

The next day Shishkin didn't come to school again, and I understood that he hadn't had the courage to tell his mother. Olga Nikolayevna asked me about Shishkin, and I told her he was ill, and when she asked me what was wrong with him I said he had influenza.

And so thanks to Shishkin I had told a barefaced lie. But I couldn't have given him away, could I, especially after he had asked me not to say anything to anybody?

Chapter Thirteen



FTER school I went over to Shishkin's and told him about having had to tell Olga Nikolayevna a lie for his sake, and he told me he had wandered all over town instead of going to school because he had been afraid to tell his mother and he couldn't come to school without a note from her.

"But what are you going to do?" I asked him. "You'll tell her today, won't you?"

"I don't know. I have another idea. I think I'd better join the circus."

"Join the circus?"

"Yes, I'll go and ask them to take me on as a performer."

"But what on earth will you do in the circus?"

"I'll do what all the other performers do. I'll teach Lobzik to count like that animal trainer we saw, and they'll take me on for sure."

"Suppose they don't."

"Oh, I'm sure they will."

"But what about school?"

"I won't go to school any more. You won't give me away to Olga Nikolayevna, will you? Be a pal, Vitya!"

"But your mother is sure to find out some time that you're not going to school."

"She won't find out for a long time, and by then I'll be a circus performer and everything will be all right."

"But suppose you won't be able to teach Lobzik?"

"Oh, but I will. Why shouldn't I? Let's try now. Lobzik!"

Lobzik came running up all excited.

Shishkin got the sugar bowl out of the cupboard.

"Now, Lobzik," he said, "we're going to teach you to count. If you're a good dog and learn quickly, you'll get some sugar. If you don't, you won't get any."

Lobzik looked at the sugar bowl and licked his chops.

"Never mind the licking, do some counting first," said Shishkin, and took ten pieces of sugar out of the bowl.

"First we'll learn to count up to ten, and then we'll go further. See, Lobzik, I have ten pieces of sugar. I'm going to count them, and you must try to remember."

He laid the sugar on a stool in front of Lobzik, counting loudly: "One, two, three . . ." all the way up to ten.

"All together ten lumps. See, Lobzik?"

Lobzik wagged his tail and reached out for the sugar.

Kostya tapped him on the nose. "No, you don't! You must learn to count first."

"How do you expect him to learn to count up to ten right away?"

I said. "Even kids aren't taught that way."

"I suppose we ought to begin with five, or perhaps three." "Of course," I said, "begin with three. It'll be easier for him." "No, I think we'd better begin with two," said Kostya. "That ought to be simple enough."

He took all the sugar off the stool except two lumps.

"Now look, Lobzik. There are only two lumps of sugar here now.

One, two. See? If I take one away, there is one left. If I put it back, there will be two again. Now, tell me, how many pieces of sugar are there here?"

Lobzik stood up and wagged his tail, then he sat on his hind legs and licked his chops.

"How do you expect him to answer?" I said. "He hasn't learned to talk human language yet, after all."

"He doesn't have to talk human language. Let him talk dog language, like the dog in the

circus. Bow-wow, Lobzik. See? Bow-wow! That will mean two."

Lobzik looked at me and he looked at Shishkin, but he didn't say anything.

"Why don't you answer?" said Shishkin. "Don't you want any sugar?"

Instead of answering, Lobzik reached out for the sugar again. "Down, bad dog!" cried Shishkin. Lobzik backed away but went on licking his chops.



"Come on, say 'bow-wow'! Say 'bow-wow'!" we urged him.

"He doesn't understand," cried Shishkin. He was terribly upset. "We'll have to get him cross. I know! I'll teach you instead of him. He'll learn quicker that way."

"Teach me! I like that!"

"Yes, you get down on your hands and knees and bark. When he sees you doing it, he'll catch on."

I got down on my hands and knees beside Lobzik.

"Now, how many lumps of sugar are there here?" Shishkin asked.

"'Bow-wow!" I replied, barking loudly.

"Good dog!" Shishkin patted my head and shoved a lump of sugar in my mouth.

I crunched the sugar, making as much noise as I could so Lobzik would be envious. Lobzik watched me with the saliva dripping from his jaws.

"Now look, Lobzik, there is one lump of sugar left. 'Wuff means one. See? Now tell me, how much sugar is there here?"

Lobzik snorted impatiently, screwed up his eyes and thumped with his tail on the floor.

"Come on, answer!" Shishkin kept at him. But Lobzik couldn't understand what was wanted of him. "You *are* a stupid dog!" said Shishkin and turned to me. "You answer for him!"

"Wuff!" I barked, and got another lump of sugar. Lobzik only licked his chops and

snorted. "We'll make him really angry in a minute," said Shishkin. He put a piece of sugar on the stool again and said: "Now, the one who answers first gets the sugar. Now, count!" "Wuff!" I cried.

"There's a good dog!" said Shishkin. "And you, Lobzik, are a dunderhead!"

He took the piece of sugar, held it out temptingly to Lobzik, then took it away and put it in my mouth. I crunched it again as noisily as I could, and poor Lobzik licked his chops, sneezed and shook his head sheepishly.

"Aha, jealous, eh?" Shishkin was delighted. "The one who barks gets the sugar, and the one who doesn't gets none."

Me put another piece of sugar in front of Lobzik and said: "Now, count."

Lobzik licked his chops, shook his head, got up, sat down again and snorted.

"Count, count, or you don't get any sugar!"

Lobzik got all tense, then he backed away a little and suddenly he let out a terrific bark.

"Hurrah!" cried Shishkin. "He got it!" And he threw him the lump of sugar.

Lobzik caught it on the fly and swallowed it in a trice.

"Now, do it again!" cried Shishkin.

"Wuff!" answered Lobzik.

And again a piece of sugar flew into his mouth.

"Come on, once more!"

"Wuff!"

"He understands!" said Shishkin all excited. "Now we'll start Lobzik's education in real earnest."

At that point Shishkin's mother came home from work.

"What is the sugar bowl doing on the table?" she asked.

"I took a little sugar to teach Lobzik with."

"Some more foolishness of yours!"

"But, Mother, you ought to see how he can count. Look!"

He put a lump of sugar in front of Lobzik and said:

"Now then, Lobzik, show Mother how you can count."

"Wuff!" said Lobzik.

"Is that all?" Mother said.

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I wouldn't say he has learned very much."

"Oh, but, Mother, after all Lobzik isn't a human being. He has just learned to count up to one, now we'll teach him to count up to two, then to three, and before you know it, he'll have learned all hi? figures."

"I see I shall have to hide the sugar bowl," said Shishkin's mother.

"But I'm not taking it for myself," Shishkin said in a hurt voice. "It's for the sake of education."

His mother laughed. "Education? What about your own education, young man? Have you done your lessons?"

"Not yet, but I'm going to in a minute."

"Didn't you promise me to have your lessons done by the time I come home?"

"I know, Mother. I just forgot today because of Lobzik."

"Well, mind you don't forget in future, or else I'll hide the sugar bowl."

Kostya and I sat down to do our lessons because he didn't even know what homework we had been given.

Next day, as soon as I came from school, we went back to teaching Lobzik.

"It's not enough for him to learn to count sugar," said Kostya. "He must learn figures too."

We took a piece of cardboard, wrote the figure "1" on it and showed it to Lobzik.

"Look, Lobzik, that is the figure one. It's the same as one piece of sugar," Shishkin explained. "Now tell me, what figure is this?"

"Wuff!" Lobzik replied.

"Good dog! He got that quickly, didn't he?" Shishkin was pleased. "Now, the next figure is two."

He put two pieces of sugar in front of Lobzik.

"Count!"

"Wuff!" said Lobzik.

"No! There are two pieces here, not one. Now think again." '"Wuff!" said Lobzik.

" 'Wuff' yourself!" Kostya mocked him. "Why do you say 'wuff ' when you know very well it should be 'wuff-wuff.' You've got a head like a pumpkin."

"Wuff," said Lobzik.

"Blockhead!" shouted Kostya. "Can't you see how many pieces there are?"

Lobzik backed away in fright.

"You mustn't shout," I said. "You must be polite to dogs, otherwise they get scared and then you can't teach them anything."

Shishkin lowered his voice and began explaining to Lobzik the difference between one and two.

"Now, count," he ordered.

"Wuff!"

"Bark again!" I prompted him. "Wuff!"

Lobzik looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I nodded and winked for all I was worth. And he gave another timid sort of bark.

"That's it—two!" Shishkin cried and threw him a piece of sugar. "Now, let's try it again."

But Lobzik only barked once.

"Go on, bark again! Bark again!" I whispered like last time.

"Don't you go prompting him," said Shishkin. "He's got to learn himself. Come on, Lobzik!"

Lobzik barked again.

"That's right!" said Shishkin. "But you must bark twice running."

He made him do it again. Again Lobzik barked only once, but when he saw that we were still waiting for something he gave another bark. Gradually we got him to bark twice in succession, and went on with it. Everything went swimmingly that day, but when we began again the next day we found that everything was mixed up in his head. When we showed him a three he barked four

times or even more. When we showed him ten he barked twice, and did all sorts of silly things like that. Kostya got very angry and shouted at him. He took it into his head that Lobzik was doing it on purpose. Sometimes Lobzik did give the right answer, by accident most likely, but Kostya was sure it wasn't.

"See, he got it right that time. That means he knows the figure, but next time you ask him he'll give the wrong answer."

He thought that Lobzik must be tired of learning to count and that he was deliberately giving the wrong answers in the hope that we would give up the whole business. For instance, Kostya showed him a five and Lobzik said it was a four.

"It isn't four, Lobzik, look again," Kostya said gently.

Lobzik barked four times again.

"Now, Lobzik, don't be silly, you know very well it isn't four," Kostya coaxed him.

"Four," Lobzik said again.

"Blockhead!" said Kostya. He was beginning to lose his temper. "Think again. I'll give you one more chance."

"Four," said Lobzik.

"You'll get four wallops on the nose if you're not careful!" shouted Kostya. "Just say it again and you'll see!"

"Wuff, wuff, wuff, wuff!"

Kostya blew up. "You bad, wicked dog!" he cried. "You'll drive me mad!" He took the figure "4" and shoved it under Lobzik's nose.

"All right. Now what figure is this?"

"Wuff, wuff, wuff, wuff, wuff," said Lobzik.

"Look at that!" cried Kostya. "When you show him a five he tells you it's four, and when you show him a four he stands there calmly telling you five! And you say he isn't doing it on purpose! I know why he's peeved. I accidentally trod on his paw this morning, and now he's paying me back."

I didn't know what had got into Lobzik, but it was quite obvious that our training was a failure. Perhaps we weren't going about it the

right way, or perhaps Lobzik simply didn't have a head for arithmetic.

"Hadn't you better own up to your mother and come back to school?" I suggested.

"No, no! I can't do that now. Not after I've stayed away so long. I don't know what would happen to mother if she found out. It isn't as if I'd only missed one day. This is no joke!"

"Suppose you tell Olga Nikolayevna and ask her advice?"

"No, I'm too ashamed to tell Olga Nikolayevna."

"If you're ashamed, perhaps I could talk to her about it?"

"You? Want to give me away, eh? A fine friend you are!"

"Who said I wanted to give you away? I didn't mean that at all. But you said yourself you're ashamed to talk about it, so I thought I could help you out."

"Silly ass! I would be ten times more ashamed if you were to tell! If you can't

suggest anything better than that, you ought to keep quiet."

"But what's to be done?" I said. "Lobzik's a failure. You couldn't get a job in the circus. Do you still think you can teach him?"

"No, I suppose it isn't any use. If you ask me, Lobzik is either a terrible fraud or a plain dunce. You can't do anything with him. I'll have to get another dog. Or perhaps it would be better to be an acrobat instead."

"How do you expect to be an acrobat?"

"I'll turn somersaults and walk on my hands. I've tried it and I don't do so badly, except that I can't stand on my hands very long. I'll have to get someone to hold my legs up at first, until I get used to it. Let's try it. You hold my legs and I'll have a shot."

He got down on all fours, and I picked his legs up and held them while he walked about the room on his hands. But his arms soon got tired and gave way, and he fell and bumped his head on the floor.

"That's all right," he said as he got up and rubbed the bump on his forehead. "My arms will gradually get stronger, and then I'll be able to walk about by myself."

"It takes a long time to learn to be an acrobat," I said.

"That doesn't matter. The winter holidays will be here soon. I'll manage somehow until then."

"But what are you going to do after that? The holidays will be over before you know it."

"Well, there'll be the summer holidays after that."

"A pretty long time after."

"Oh, that's all right."

Queer chap, Shishkin! That was the answer he had for everything. He only had to think of something to imagine it was already done. But I could see that it was all nothing but empty talk and that in a few days he would be thinking up something else.

Chapter Fourteen



KOSTYA'S mother and aunt had no idea that he was not attending school. His mother looked over his copy-books as soon as she came home from work, but Kostya always had his lessons done by then because I came every day and told him what we had for homework. He was so afraid that his mother might find out, that he

did his lessons far more regularly now than when he was at school. Every morning he took his satchel and left the house, but instead of going to school he wandered all over town. He couldn't stay at home because his Aunt Zina didn't go to the theatre school until the afternoon. But it wasn't very safe to be in the street either. One day he nearly bumped into our English teacher, and had to dash into a side-street so she wouldn't see him. Another time he saw a neighbour in the street and darted into the nearest doorway to wait until she had passed. It got so that he was afraid of walking about the streets, and he would go as far away from his own neighbourhood as he could so as not to meet anyone who knew him. Just the same, he imagined that all the passers-by were staring at him as if they knew he was playing truant. The weather was pretty frosty at the time, and it was too cold to stay outside very long, so he would drop into a shop occasionally to warm up and then go on.

I began to feel very uncomfortable about the whole affair, and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't get Shishkin out of my head for a minute. The empty place beside me at the desk reminded me of him all the time. While we sat in our warm class-room I thought of him wandering about town all by himself, hiding from people like a thief, or going into shops to get warm. I thought of him so much that I couldn't attend to my lessons properly. At home too he was in my mind all the time. And at night I couldn't sleep for thinking all sorts of things and racking my brains to find some way out for him. If I told Olga Nikolayevna, she would bring him back to school right away, but I was afraid that if I did that, everyone would call me a sneak. But I wanted so badly to talk to someone about it that I decided to sound Lika out.

"Listen, Lika," I said, "do the girls in your class tell on one another?"

"Tell on one another? What do you mean?"

"Well, suppose one of the girls does something she shouldn't, will any of the other girls tell the teacher? Has anything like that ever happened in your class?"

"Yes," said Lika. "The other day Petrova broke a hydrangea on the window-sill. Antonina Ivanovna thought it was Sidorova and was going to punish her. But I saw that it was Petrova who did it, so I told Antonina Ivanovna."

"You did? I never thought we had a sneak in the family!"

"I wasn't being a sneak! I was only telling the truth. If I hadn't said anything, Antonina Ivanovna would have punished Sidorova, and she wasn't to blame at all."

"Anyway it was a sneaky thing to do," I said. "In our class nobody ever tells on anyone."

"Then I suppose you blame things on one another."

"What things?"

"Well, suppose you broke a hydrangea in the class-room and the teacher accused someone else of doing it. . . ."

"We don't have hydrangeas in our class-room. We have cactuses."

"It makes no difference. Suppose you broke a cactus and your teacher blamed Shishkin for it. If you didn't own up and nobody said anything, Shishkin would have to take the blame for it."

"Well, Shishkin's got a tongue in his head, hasn't he? He would say he hadn't done it and that would be the end of it."

"He would be suspected just the same."

"What of it? No one could prove he did it if he didn't, could they?"

"We don't do things like that in our school," said Lika. "Why should we let anyone be suspected for nothing? If you do something wrong, you must own up yourself, and if you don't, anyone else has the right to speak up."

"You're just a lot of sneaks."

"We're nothing of the kind. Do you think Petrova did the honest thing? Antonina Ivanovna was going to punish another girl for what she'd done. But she just sat there and said nothing, glad to be out of it herself. If I hadn't said anything, I would be just as much to blame as she was. Would that be right?"



"That was a special case," I said. "But suppose a girl stayed away from school without letting anyone at home know about it. Has anything like that ever happened?"

"No."

"Of course," I said. "How could you girls do a wicked thing like that? You're all such goody-goodies."

"Anyhow," said Lika, "we have a good class. But why do you ask? Has something like that happened in your school?"

"No," I said. "Never."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Oh, I was just interested."

I didn't say any more to Lika after that, but I couldn't stop thinking about Shishkin. I wanted terribly to ask Mum's advice but I was afraid that she would let the school know and then it would be all up. Mum noticed that something was wrong with me. She looked at me in such a funny way sometimes as if she knew I had something to tell her. Mum always knows when I want to tell her something. But she never asks, she waits for me to speak first. She says if anything happens it's far better for me to own up myself than wait until I'm forced to. How on earth she guesses is beyond me. I suppose I have the kind of face that tells people what's going on in my mind. That day I sat there looking up at her now and again and trying to decide whether to tell her or not. Mum kept glancing at me, too, as if she was waiting for me to speak. We both kept it up for quite a long time; I pretended to read a book and she pretended to be sewing. It would have

been funny if I hadn't been so upset about Shishkin. Finally, Mum couldn't hold out any longer, and she laughed. "Come on, out with it!" she said.

"Out with what?" I asked, pretending I didn't understand what she meant.

"What's on your mind?"

"On my mind? Nothing much." I tried to get out of it but I felt that I was going to blurt everything out in a minute and I was glad that Mum had spoken first because it's always easier that way.

"As if I can't see that you're simply dying to tell me something. You've been going about for three days now with a face as long as a poker and imagining that no one noticed anything. Come on, now, let's hear what it is. You're bound to tell me in the end, you know. What is it? Something wrong at school?"

"No, not at school," I said. "Yes, at school."

"You haven't got yourself another 2, I hope?"

"No, it's nothing like that."

"Then what's the trouble?"

"It isn't me. Nothing's wrong with me."

"Who is it, then?"

"It's ... it's Shishkin."

"And what's wrong with Shishkin?"

"He doesn't want to study."

"Doesn't he? Why not?"

"He just doesn't want to and that's all!"

I thought I had said too much. "Oh dear," I thought, "what have I done? Suppose Mum goes to school tomorrow and tells the teacher?"

"You mean he doesn't do his lessons?" Mum asked. "He gets low marks?"

So she hadn't caught on. Thank goodness!

"No, he doesn't do his lessons. He has 2 in Russian. He doesn't want to work at his Russian at all. And he's been behind with it ever since the Third."

"How did he get into the Fourth in that case?"

"I don't know. He came to us from another school this term."

"Your teacher ought to pay more attention to him. He mustn't be allowed to lag behind like that."

"Yes, but he's a smart one. He copies his homework from the other boys, and whenever we have dictation or composition, he just doesn't come to school."

"You ought to take him in hand. I can see that you're worried about him. Why don't you help him?"

"How can I help him when he doesn't want to do anything himself?"

"You must make him see how important it is to study properly. Try and influence him. You were able to take yourself in hand, but he needs someone to help him. If he has a good friend to help him, he will be all right."

"Aren't I a good friend?"

"I suppose you are since you are worried about him."

I felt so ashamed of myself for not having told Mum the whole truth that I threw on my

coat and went over to Shishkin's to thrash the whole thing out properly.

The funny thing was that Shishkin and I had never been such close friends as we were now. I thought about him all day long, and he had become terribly attached to me, too. He was lonesome for his schoolmates, and he said that he had no one but me now.

Kostya was sitting with his mother and Aunt Zina having tea when I came in. The big blue lamp-shade over the table gave the room a sort of twilight look, the way it is outside on a summer evening when the sun has gone down and it isn't quite dark yet. They were all very pleased to see me. They made me sit down and have tea with rolls. Kostya's mother and his Aunt Zina asked after my mother and father. They asked me where Dad worked and what he did. Kostya listened and said nothing. He broke his roll in half and dunked one half in his tea. Gradually the roll swelled in the tea until it took up almost the whole glass. But Kostya didn't seem to notice it.

"Wake up, Kostya," said his mother, smiling.

Kostya started. "I was thinking of my Dad. Tell me about him, Mother."

"What shall I tell you? I've told you all there is to tell."

"Well, tell me again."

"He never gets tired of hearing about his father. But, of course, he doesn't even remember him," said Aunt Zina.

"Yes I do," said Kostya.

"How can you? You were a mere baby when he went to the front. The war had only started."

"Just the same I remember him," Shishkin said stubbornly. "I remember lying in my cot and Daddy came over and picked me up in his arms and kissed me."

"You can't possibly remember anything of the kind," said Aunt Zina. "You were only three weeks old at the time."

"But Daddy came home on leave when I was more than a year old."

"Yes, but he only ran in for a minute when his unit was passing through. Mother must have told you about it, and you think you remember."

"No, I remember it myself," Kostya insisted. "I was asleep, and then I woke up and Daddy picked me up and kissed me. I remember how rough and prickly his army coat was. Then he went away, and I don't remember anything after that."

"A baby of that age can't remember anything," said Aunt Zina.

"But I do," Kostya insisted, almost in tears by this time, "don't I, Mother? There, Mother will tell you."

"Of course you do, dear," his mother said soothingly. "After all, if you remember that his coat was prickly that seems to prove it."

"Of course," said Shishkin. "The coat was terribly prickly. I remember it quite well, and I'll never forget it because it was my Daddy and he was killed in the war."

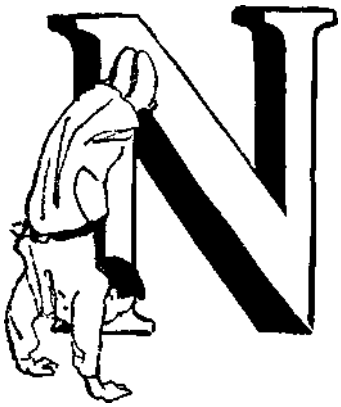
Shishkin was unusually quiet all that evening. He was in such a queer mood that I did not even try to have a talk with him as I had planned, and I soon went home.

I lay awake a long time that night thinking about Shishkin. How nice it would be if he was doing well at school, I thought. Nothing like this would have happened to him then. I had been pretty bad too, but I had taken myself in hand and now I was doing quite well. Of course, it was easier for me than for Shishkin: after all I have a father. I always try to follow his example. I admire the way he works and I want to be like him. But poor old Shishkin has no father. His father was killed in the war when Kostya was a little baby. I wanted to help Kostya very much and thought that perhaps if I tried studying with him properly he might improve his Russian and then everything would be all right. I decided to start working with him every day, but then I remembered that there was no use thinking about studying with him while he stayed away

from school. I tried thinking of some way to persuade him to come back, but I saw that no persuading would help because Kostya hadn't any will-power and he would never be able to muster enough courage to confess to his mother at this late date. I saw that I would have to be very firm with him. I made up my mind to go and see him the next day after school and have a serious talk with him. If he refused to own up to his mother and return to school by himself, I would tell him I wasn't going to lie to Olga Nikolayevna any more and shield him, because it was only doing him harm. If he refused to see that it was all for his own good, then there was nothing to be done about it. Let him quarrel with me! I could stand it, because later on he would see that I couldn't have done anything else and he would make it up with me. As soon as I had come to this decision, I felt much better, and I was terribly ashamed of myself for not having told Mum about it long ago. I wanted to get up that

minute and tell her, but it was late and everyone was fast asleep.

Chapter Fifteen



EXT DAY everything turned out quite different from what I had planned. I had intended going to Shishkin's after school to have a serious talk with him for the last time. But since I had been telling everyone at school that Shishkin was ill, our whole group decided to pay him a visit. The minute lessons were over, I dashed over to Shishkin's to warn him. I came running in and found him all excited.

"Know what, Vitya?" he said. "I can stand on my hands! You stand near the wall. The wall stops your feet from falling over."

"This is no time for standing on your hands," I said. "Get into bed right away."

"What for?"

"You're ill, aren't you?"

"III?"

"That's what I've been telling everyone at school. You told me to yourself."

"What about it?"

"Well, now the boys are coming to see you." "What!" The next minute he had dived under the covers with all his clothes on and his boots as well.

"What shall I say to them when they come?" he asked. "I don't know. Say you're ill. There's nothing else to say." Before long the boys came. They took off their coats in the passage and filed into the room. Shishkin drew the blanket right up under his chin and looked at them uneasily.

"Hallo there, Shishkin, old chap!" the boys greeted him. "Hallo, fellows!" he answered in such a weak voice you could hardly hear it. Anyone would think he really was ill.

"We dropped in to see how you were getting on," said Yura. "Very nice of you. Sit down, won't you?" "How are you feeling?" asked Vanya.

"Not so good. . . ."

"Still in bed?"

"Uh-huh!"

"It must be awful for you to lie in bed all the time," said Lenya. "Yes, it is."

"And you're alone all day long?"

"Yes, all alone. Mother is at work and my aunt goes to the theatre school."

"Well, we'll have to come and see you more often. You must forgive us for not coming all this time. We thought you'd get well soon and come back to school."

"That's all right, fellows, Vitya comes to see me every day." "We'll come every day, too, shall we?" suggested Slava. "That will be fine," said

Shishkin. He couldn't very well tell them not to come, could he?

"What's the trouble?" Yura asked.

"Everything. Arms, legs, everything."

"Go on! Even your legs?"

"Yes, and my head as well." "You mean it hurts all the time?"

"N-n-n-no, not all the time. It hurts a bit, then it stops for a while and then it starts hurting again something terrible."

"There was a boy in our flat who was ill like that. He had rheumatism," said Vasya Yerokhin. "Maybe you've got rheumatism, too?"

"Maybe I have," said Shishkin.

"What does the doctor say?" Vanya asked.

"You know those doctors. All he says is 'stick out your tongue and say a-ah'!"

"What are they treating you with?"

"Some medicine or other."

"What medicine?"

"I don't know what it's called. A mixture of some kind."

"Bitter or sweet?"

"Terribly bitter!" said Shishkin, and made such a face you'd really think he had taken some nasty medicine.

"When I was sick they gave me a mixture, too. It was awfully bitter! I didn't want to take it," said Dima Balakirev.

"I don't want to take it either."

"Oh, you'd better. You'll get well sooner." '

"I do take it."

"It doesn't matter if it's bitter," said Lenya. "Pop a lump of sugar in your mouth right after, and it won't be so bad."

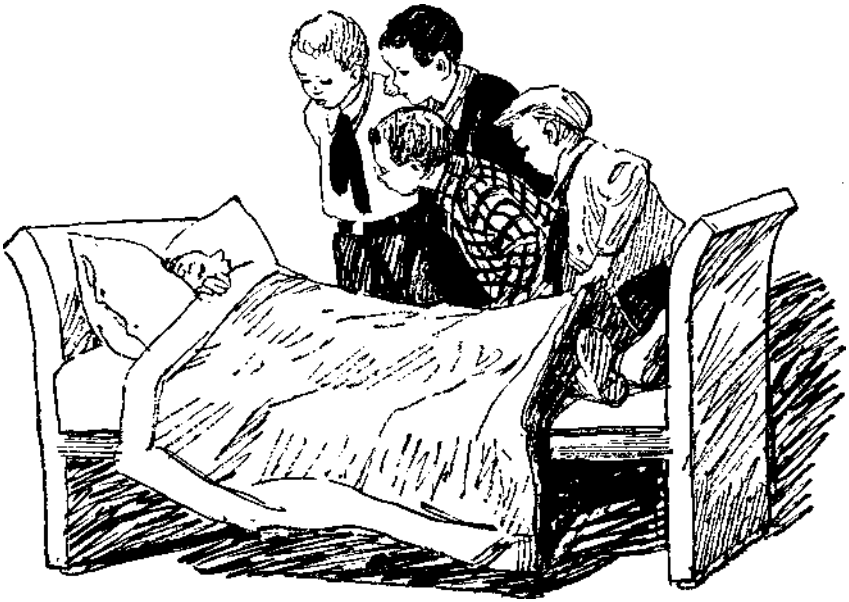
"Thanks, I'll try that."

"And don't worry about lessons. As soon as you're a little better we'll come and help you to catch up."

"Oh, I'll catch up all right," said Shishkin.

At that point I noticed Shishkin's boot sticking out from under the blanket. I went cold all over. What if one of the boys had noticed it? But they were too busy talking to him. I went over when no one was looking and covered it up.

"All right, boys," I said. "He's still a bit weak, you mustn't tire him. You'd better go home now."



The boys got up to go.

"Good-bye, Kostya. Hurry up and get well. We'll drop in and see you tomorrow."

As soon as they had gone, Shishkin jumped out of bed and hopped round the room with glee.

"Wasn't that marvellous!" he cried. "No one guessed. Everything is fine!"

"There's nothing to be so pleased about," I said. "You and I are going to have a serious talk."

"What about?"

"About you coming back to school."

"I know I ought to go back to school, but how can I now? You see yourself it's no use."

"I don't see anything of the kind. I decided today to talk to you for the last time. If you don't come to school tomorrow, I'll go and tell Olga Nikolayevna everything."

"But why?" Kostya asked, gaping.

"Because you've got to go to school and not roam around wasting time. You'll never be an acrobat anyway."

"Why won't I? I've already learned to walk on my hands!"

He went over to the wall and stood on his hands.

At that moment the door opened and Lenya came in.

"I forgot my gloves," he said. "Hey, what's this? What are you standing on your head for?"

Shishkin got to his feet and stood there looking foolish.

"So you're not really ill at all!" cried Lenya.

"I am, honest, I am!" said Shishkin, getting as red as a beet-root.

He started groaning and limped over to the bed.

"Stop pretending! You said your legs and arms ache, and I saw you standing on your hands!"

"They do ache, honestly!"

"Don't tell lies! How did you manage to get dressed so quick? You must have been lying in bed with your clothes on."

"All right, I'll tell you a secret if you swear you won't tell anyone."

"Why should I swear?"

"Then I won't tell you."

At that moment we heard steps outside in the passage. The door opened, and Vanya looked in.

"Are you coming, Lenya? We're waiting for you."

"Come here, Vanya! It turns out he isn't ill, after all."

"Not ill?" said Vanya, coming into the room.

"Who isn't ill?" we heard Yura's voice from the passage. And he came into the room, too, and the others behind him.

"Him, Shishkin. He isn't ill at all," said Lenya.

"How's that?"

"I came in and found him standing on his head!"

"What do you mean by fooling us?" the others demanded.

"I didn't mean anything, I was just having a little fun," Shishkin said lamely.

"So that's your idea of fun?"

Kostya shrugged his shoulders.

"You're a fine one," said Vanya. "Here we go worrying about you and come to visit you, and all the time you're fooling us. A nice joke, pretending to be ill!"

"I won't do it any more, fellows, honest I won't," said Shishkin.

"Why don't you come to school?" asked Yura. "I suppose you've been pretending to be ill so as not to go to school."

"Look, I'll tell you everything, only don't get angry. I didn't mean to fool you. You see, I wanted to be a circus performer."

"A circus performer!"

"Yes, I wanted to be an acrobat in the circus."

"You must be off your bean!"

"I'm not."

"What makes you think you can get a job in the circus?" asked Vanya.

"Where do you think circus performers come from?"

"But you haven't explained why you're not attending school."

"I don't want to learn any more. I know quite enough."

"Enough for what?"

"Enough to be a circus performer, anyway."

"Do you think circus performers don't need any education?"

"Well, I've had some education, haven't I?"

"Education!" scoffed Yura. "Why, you can't even spell properly.

You have to finish secondary school first and then you go to a circus school. Circus performers must be educated just like anyone else. You ought to ask Olga Nikolayevna's advice."

"As if I don't know what Olga Nikolayevna would say!" said Shishkin.

"If you ask me, fellows, it's an idiotic notion he's got into his head," said Igor. "He'd better get rid of it and come back to school tomorrow."

"And if he doesn't come tomorrow, we'll tell Olga Nikolayevna," said Yura.

"Then you'll be a lot of sneaks."

"No, we won't," said Yura. "We're giving you fair warning."

"You just try not coming to school tomorrow!" said Igor threateningly. "Enough

loafing. You don't want to grow up to be a good-for-nothing, do you?"

Just then we heard steps in the hallway again and someone knocked at the door. Instead of opening the door, Shishkin dived into bed again and covered himself with the blanket. I went and opened the door, and there stood Olga Nikolayevna.

"Why, you're all here!" said Olga Nikolayevna, stepping into the room. "So you decided to come and see the invalid?" The boys said nothing. No one knew what to say. Kostya stared goggle-eyed at Olga Nikolayevna and pulled the blanket over his chin as if he would have liked to hide his head under it. Olga Nikolayevna went over to the bed.

"Poor Kostya, you have been having a nasty time of it, I'm afraid. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Yura blurted out. "He isn't ill at all."

"Not ill?"

"No. He's perfectly well."

Shishkin saw the game was up, so he crawled out from under the blanket and sat on the edge of the bed hanging his head and staring at the floor. Olga Nikolayevna looked at all of us in turn. When she came to me, she said:

"But Vitya, why did you tell me Kostya was ill?"

I was so ashamed I wished the earth would open and swallow me up.

"Why don't you answer? You told me a lie, then!"

"It wasn't me. It was him. He told me to."

"So Kostya told you to deceive me?"

I nodded.

"And you did as he told you?"

I nodded again.

"Do you think you did right?"

"But he asked me to do it!"

"Do you think you did him a good turn by telling me lies?"

"No."

"Then why did you do it?"

"He's my chum. I didn't want to give him away!"

"Give him away? To whom? To the enemy? Am I your enemy, then?"

I didn't know what to say, so I stared down at the floor.

"I didn't think my pupils considered me their enemy!" said Olga Nikolayevna.

"But we don't, Olga Nikolayevna," said Vanya. "Of course, we don't."

"Then why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Nobody knew about it. We only found out today when we came to visit him."

"Very well, we'll talk about this later on. Now, tell me, Kostya, why haven't you been attending school?"

"I was afraid to," mumbled Kostya.

"Afraid of what?"

"I was afraid you would ask me for a note from Mother."

"What note?"

"About having missed school when we had dictation."

"Why did you stay away when we had dictation?"

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of getting 2."

"And so you deliberately stayed away when we had dictation and were afraid to come back because you didn't have a note from your mother?"

"Yes."

"And what did you think of doing when you decided not to come to school?" Olga Nikolayevna asked him. . "I don't know."

"But you must have had some plans?"

"He wanted to be a circus performer," said Yura.

"But you can't get into a circus school unless you have finished secondary school. And after that you have to study five years in the circus school. You don't think you could become a circus performer overnight, do you?"

"No, I suppose I couldn't," Shishkin agreed.

"You see! Without thinking it over properly, you simply decided to drop school. Wasn't that rather foolish, Kostya?"

Shishkin said nothing.

"What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I suggest that you think it over."

Shishkin was silent for a while, then he looked up darkly and said:

"I want to come back to school!"

"That's the best way out, of course. I also think you should come back, but on one condition: you must promise to turn over a new leaf and work hard at your lessons." "I promise," said Shishkin. "Very well. Come to school tomorrow morning and I'll ask the Director to allow you to continue your studies." "All right," said Shishkin.

Olga Nikolayevna told us all to go home and do our lessons. When Kostya saw that she was going to stay, he said: "Olga Nikolayevna, please don't tell my mother." "Why not?"

"I'll study harder now, honest I will. Only don't tell her, please!" "So you want to continue to deceive your mother? And you want me to help you deceive her?"

"I'll never deceive Mother again. I don't want to vex her." "But if your mother finds out that you and I have both been deceiving her, she will be far more vexed, won't she?" "I suppose she will."

"So you see we'll have to tell her. But if you promise to begin studying in real earnest, I shall ask your mother not to be too hard on you."

"I promise."

"Agreed then," said Olga Nikolayevna. "Now, get your books and we'll have a lesson."

I went home with the others, so I don't know what happened after that.

Chapter Sixteen



O NEXT day Shishkin came back to school. I was so glad to see him that I very nearly rushed forward to meet him. He felt a bit awkward at first and kept glancing at the boys as if he expected them to start ragging him. But when he saw that nobody was going to do anything of the kind, he calmed down and took

his seat next to me. At last that empty seat was occupied again and I felt as if a big hollow inside me had been filled too, and that everything was all right again.

Olga Nikolayevna didn't say anything to Shishkin, and lessons went on as usual. During the break Volodya came and the boys told him what Shishkin had done. I thought Volodya would start lecturing Shishkin, but he lectured me instead.

"You knew your chum was doing wrong. Why didn't you help to put him right?" said Volodya. "You ought to have had a serious talk with him, and if he had refused to listen to you, you ought to have told your teacher, or me, or the other boys. But you kept quiet."

"You think I didn't try talking to him? I must have talked to him hundreds of times! What could I do? It was his own idea not to come to school."

"Yes, but why? Because he was behind with his studies. Did you help him with his lessons?

You knew he was getting bad marks, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "It's all because of his Russian. He always copied his Russian exercises from my note-book."

"You see? If you were a real friend you wouldn't have let him copy. A real friend must sometimes be strict and not overlook his friend's shortcomings. But you don't care whether your chum behaves badly or not. That sort of friendship isn't worth anything! It's false friendship."

The boys began saying I'd been a bad friend to Shishkin, but Volodya said:

"Let's get together after school and thrash this out properly. As for you, Vitya, you ought to take an example from Tolya."

"It's all very well for Tolya," I said. "He's chairman of our Pioneer Council, but I'm just nobody."

"Nonsense. You're a Pioneer, aren't you? Well, that's somebody. Besides, you may be

elected Council Chairman next time for all you know."

"No, I won't," I said. "No one would ever elect me. I haven't any authority."

"Why haven't you?"

"Because I haven't. Nobody will ever elect me to anything. Besides, I don't do any communal work."

"Would you like to do something?"

I said I would, and the meeting broke up.

We agreed to meet after school, but as soon as lessons were over, Olga Nikolayevna called me and Shishkin and said:

"Kostya and Vitya, the Director wants to see you."

"What about?" I asked. I was quite scared.

"He will tell you himself. Now run along. Don't be afraid. He won't eat you!"

We went to the Director's office. The door was open, and we stopped on the threshold and said: "Good afternoon, Igor Alexandrovich!"

Igor Alexandrovich was sitting at his desk writing. "Good afternoon, boys. Come in and

sit down over here," he said, pointing to the sofa by his desk. He went on writing.

We were afraid to sit down because the sofa was very close to the Director's desk, so we stayed where we were. It seemed safer there. Igor Alexandrovich finished writing and took off his spectacles. "Sit down! Sit down!"

We went over to the sofa and sat down on the very edge. It was covered with shiny leather which was so slippery that I kept sliding off all through the talk—and it was a very long talk too—so that by the end of it I was far more tired than if I had stood all the time on one leg.

"Well, Shishkin, suppose you tell us why you took it into your head to play truant?" Igor Alexandrovich began. "I don't know," Shishkin mumbled. "H-m," said Igor Alexandrovich. "And who does know, do you think?"

"I . . . I don't know," Shishkin said.

"Perhaps you think I do?" asked Igor Alexandrovich.

Shishkin looked at Igor Alexandrovich out of the corner of his eye to see if he was joking, but the Director's face was grave. So he said again: "I don't know."

"Now, we won't get very far if you insist on giving the same answer to all my questions. If we're going to have a talk let's be serious about it. I'm not asking you out of idle curiosity why you stayed away from school, you know."

"I . . . I was afraid," stammered Shishkin.

"What were you afraid of?"

"I was afraid of dictation, and so I didn't come to school that day; and then I was afraid Olga Nikolayevna would ask for a note from my mother, and so I didn't come any more after that."

"But why were you so afraid of dictation? Is dictation so terrible?"

"I was afraid of getting 2."

"So you were behind with your Russian?"

"Yes."

"And why, may I ask?"

"Because it's hard for me."

"Are the other subjects hard, too?"

"No, the others are easier."

"Then why should Russian be so difficult?"

"I don't know how to spell."

"Well, you'll simply have to learn, you know. I daresay you don't pay enough attention to your Russian."

Shishkin nodded. "I don't."

"Why?"

"It just doesn't go somehow. I only have to read my history or geography once to know it, but as soon as I sit down to write something, I make all sorts of mistakes."

"In that case you must give more time to your Russian. It's no good doing only the things that come easy. We must do the hard things too. We must learn to overcome difficulties. If you want to learn something, you must be diligent. Now, Maleyev," Igor Alexandrovich turned to me, "you were behind with your arithmetic at one time, weren't you?"
;

"Yes, I was."

"But now you are doing better at it?"

"Yes."

"Well, how did you manage it?"

"Because I was sick of getting bad marks for arithmetic. Olga Nikolayevna told me I could do better if I tried hard enough. So I began to try hard."

"And you succeeded?"

"Yes, I did."

"But it wasn't easy for you, was it?"

"No, it was very hard at first, but now it's as easy as anything."

"You see, Shishkin. You ought to take an example from Maleyev. It will be hard at first, but as soon as you have got over the first hurdle, it will be easier. So I would advise you to make up your mind to work harder, and I am sure you will succeed."

"All right," said Shishkin. "I'll try."

"You must do more than try. You must take the bull by the horns and get down to work at once."

"I'll . . . I'll do my best," said Shishkin.

"That's still not very definite," said Igor Alexandrovich. "What are you afraid of? Don't your classmates help you? Maleyev, you're Shishkin's friend, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "But it's false friendship."

"What? Oh, yes. I was going to talk to you about that, but I see you have already discussed the matter. Do you like being accused of false friendship?"

"No, I don't. But if everybody says so I suppose it's true."

"Are you quite sure you understand what it means?"

"Not quite," I confessed.

"You see, Vitya, a false friend is one who only pretends to be a friend. It is the opposite of true friendship. A true friend will not stand by and let his chum do what he knows to be wrong. By allowing Shishkin to stay away from school when you knew he was deceiving his mother and teachers and harming himself into the bargain you were not being a true friend to him. Do you understand now?"

"Yes," I said. "I shall try my best in future to be a true friend to Shishkin."

"In that case you must help him with his Russian. He has fallen way behind with it, and he will not be able to catch up with the class by himself."

"Yes, I'll help him," I said. "I know how to do it, too. I was in the same boat myself once, so I know how to get over that hump."

"Good! So you'll try?" smiled Igor Alexandrovich.

"No," I said, "I won't try. I'll get to work right away on him."

"Splendid! That's what I like," said Igor Alexandrovich. "Do you have any communal work to do in the school?"

"No," I said.

"Well, that could be your task for the beginning. I have spoken to Olga Nikolayevna, and she tells me you could certainly help Shishkin. If you were able to help yourself you can surely help someone else. But you must take your task seriously."

"I'll be very serious about it," I said.

"See to it that he does all his tasks himself and in good time, and make sure that he doesn't leave anything undone. Don't do anything for him. That wouldn't be helping him. When he learns to work independently, he will begin to have confidence in himself and he will no longer need your help. Understand?"

"Yes, Igor Alexandrovich."

"As for you, Shishkin, remember that everyone must do his job honestly and conscientiously."

"But I haven't got any job, I'm only a schoolboy," said Shishkin.

"A schoolboy's job is to study, and if you want to study well you must work hard at it. Grown-ups work in factories and collective farms; they build power stations and canals to join up rivers and seas, plant forests and irrigate the deserts. See how much work they have to do! And children go to school so as to learn to be useful to their country when they

grow up. Don't you want to be useful to your country?"

"Of course I do!"

"There you are! But merely wanting to is not enough. You must be persevering and resolute, because if you don't persevere, you will never achieve anything."

"I will persevere!"

"Good!" said Igor Alexandrovich. "And besides persevering you must be truthful. I am afraid you have not been very truthful. If you had been, you would not have deceived your mother and your teacher, not to speak of your classmates."

"I will be truthful from now on."

"I hope so," said Igor Alexandrovich. "But that isn't all. You ought to have more respect for your classmates. You turned your back on them all and thought you could get along without them."

"But I was awfully lonesome without them!" cried Shishkin, and he sounded as if he was going to start blubbering.

"Well, that's a good sign. Perhaps that will teach you to appreciate your comrades instead of ignoring them."

"I won't ever again," said Shishkin.

"And what did you do with yourself when you stayed away from school, young man?" Igor Alexandrovich asked him.

We told him how we had taught Lobzik to count. Igor Alexandrovich got very interested and made us tell him all about it.

"And do you really think you can' teach a dog to count like a human being?" he asked when we had finished. .'

"But what about the dog we saw in the circus?" Igor Alexandrovich laughed.

"That dog didn't know how to count," he said. "It had been taught to bark by signals. When the dog has barked as many times as the trainer needs, he gives it a signal to stop. The public do not see the signal, and they think the dog knows how to count."

"But what sort of signal does the trainer give?" Kostya wanted to know.

"Oh, he nods his head slightly, or waves his hand, or snaps his fingers quietly."

"But sometimes our Lobzik counts right without any signals," said Kostya.

"Dogs are very observant," said Igor Alexandrovich. "You may nod your head or make some other movement without being aware of it each time Lobzik barks the correct number of times. He takes note of that and tries to guess what you want. But since your movements are very difficult to catch he often makes mistakes. If you want him to give the right answers, you must teach him to respond to some definite signal. A snap of the fingers, say."

"I'm going to try that for sure," said Kostya. "But first I'll see to my Russian. After that I can teach Lobzik."

"That's right. And when we have a concert at school, you two can show off Lobzik and his tricks."

We had been awfully afraid that Igor Alexandrovich would think up some

punishment for us, but evidently he hadn't intended punishing us at all. He had only wanted to make us see how important it was to study properly.

Chapter Seventeen



HEN WE came out of the Director's office, we found Volodya and all the other boys waiting for us in the corridor. They crowded round and began firing questions at us.

"Well? What happened? What did Igor Alexandrovich say? Did you get it hot?"

"No," I said. "Igor Alexandrovich forgave us." "That's fine!" said Tolya. "Now let's go to the Pioneer Room and have a talk. We've got to thrash this out."

So we all went to the Pioneer Room. Shishkin hung back. "It's all right, Shishkin, don't be scared," said Yura. "We're not going to lecture you."

When we were all seated round the table, Volodya began to speak. "Now let's see what can be done to help Shishkin," he said. "He'd been getting such bad marks that he finally stopped coming to school altogether. That was wrong of him, of course. But we are all a lot to blame. We didn't pay enough attention to his low marks, and we didn't help him in time."

"That's true, of course," said Vanya. "But Shishkin ought to realize that he has to pull himself together. If he doesn't start in real earnest now, it will be the same story all over again."

"Vanya's right, Shishkin. You mustn't take offence, but you've got to turn over a new leaf,"

said Yura. "We can help you. Honest, we'll be only too glad to."

"But how?" said Lenya Astafyev. "We chose Alik Sorokin to help him and look what happened."

"Did you work with him at all?" Volodya asked Alik.

"Of course I did!" said Alik.

"How many times did you get together?"

"Well, I don't remember exactly. Two or three times, I think."

"Two or three times!" Yura snorted. "Don't you know you were supposed to study together every day? Two or three times! And you promised at a meeting. We trusted you to do a proper job and you went and let us down."

"I couldn't help it," said Alik. "Whenever I went to his place he was out. And when he did happen to be in he'd say: 'I don't feel like studying today.' So I dropped it."

"You had no right to do anything of the kind," said Yura. "You ought to have taken it up with the Pioneer group and got the others

to help. Shishkin doesn't know how to organize his time. It was your business to help him. You see to it that you get good marks yourself but you don't care how your classmates are making out. And I'm just as much to blame for not having checked your work."

"I promise to help him properly from now on," said Alik. "I suppose I spent too much time on my chess, and that's how it happened."

"No," said Volodya. "You made a mess of it once. We can't let you do it again."

"I'm going to work with Shishkin now," I said. "Igor Alexandrovich told me to."

"If Igor Alexandrovich has assigned the job to you, we've no objections. Right, boys?"

"Of course," the others agreed. "Let him have a go."

The meeting ended and we went outside. Shishkin was quiet all the way, he seemed to be thinking about something. Finally he said:

"I'm a wash-out. No will-power. No ability. No nothing."

"Don't be silly, you're not a wash-out at all," I tried to console him.

"Yes, I am, I know it. But I don't want to be one always. I'm going to take myself in hand. You'll see. But you've got to help me, Vitya. Igor Alexandrovich told you to. You daren't refuse now."

"I wasn't going to refuse," I said. "But you'll have to do as I tell you. Let's begin today. I'll come to you this afternoon and we'll start."

In the afternoon I went straight to Shishkin's. On the way up I heard Lobzik barking, and what did I see when I came into the room but Lobzik sitting on a chair and barking and Kostya snapping his fingers in front of his nose.

"I'm teaching him to respond to a signal, like Igor Alexandrovich told us," he said. "Let's work a little with Lobzik first. We can do the lessons afterwards. Lobzik's got to be taught some time."

"Kostya Shishkin!" I said severely. "Didn't I hear you promise not to begin teaching Lobzik

until you've improved your Russian? Have you forgotten already?"

"Isn't that like me!" cried Shishkin. "Out you get, Lobzik! I won't even look at you until I've improved my Russian. You can call me a jelly-fish, Vitya, if you ever catch me .trying to do that again. Well, where do we start?"

"We'll do the Russian exercise first," I said. "Can't we do geography or arithmetic instead?"

"No," I said. "I know by my own experience what to begin with. What Russian homework have we got?"

"Oh! Some more of those beastly suffixes. And then Olga Nikolayevna told me to learn one of the old rules of spelling again and do an exercise besides."

"All right, you'll begin with the exercise," I said. "I'm ready."

"You are? Then why don't you get started? You don't expect me to do your exercise for you, I hope? From now on you're going to do everything yourself. It's high time you learned to be independent!"

"Oh, all right," said Shishkin with a sigh.

He read over the rule once or twice, then he started writing the exercise. It was a very easy one. He only had to insert the missing letters in the words. While Shishkin was writing, I was doing my geography, pretending not to pay the slightest attention to him. But he was such a long time at it that I had almost done my geography before he said:

"Finished!"

But when I looked at what he'd written, my hair nearly stood on end. There were simply heaps of mistakes.

"Well, you have done a nice job!"

"Why? Is it all wrong?"

"Not all wrong, but bad enough."

"There, I knew it! I'll never be any good. It's no use!" Kostya wailed.

"Don't be an ass," I said sternly. "You can't expect to learn right away. Don't you know that you can't write the plural of 'knife' simply by adding an V?"

"I should know, but I've forgotten."

"Already?"

I made him go back over his work and showed him how the rule could work with other examples. "Now," I said, "you get to work and rewrite that exercise and try not to make any mistakes this time."

"Aw, Vitya, let's leave it the way it is. I'll try harder next time."

"Nothing doing," I said. "You promised to do as I told you, didn't you?"

With a deep sigh Shishkin started writing the exercise over again. But this time he was in an awful hurry. His letters sprawled in all directions, some lay on their side, some hung dizzily above the line, some slid down under the line. You could see he was fed up with lessons already.

Just then Yura came in. He saw us busy with our books.

"Doing your lessons, eh? That's fine! What subject?"

"Russian," I said. "Olga Nikolayevna gave him a special task."

Yura took a look at what Shishkin was writing.

"Hey, what's this?" he said. "Look at this mistake! You can't even copy straight!"

Shishkin groaned.

Just then Vanya came in.

"Doing your lessons, eh?"

"That's right," we said.

"Good for you! You'll earn the thanks of the whole class."

"Why should the class thank me for doing my lessons?" said Shishkin. "You study to learn something, not to get thanks for it."

"That isn't what I meant. I meant to say the whole class wants you to study well and get good marks. That's why I was glad to see the two of you busy working."

The door opened and Vasya Yerokhin came in.

"Doing your lessons, eh?" he said.

"Hey, what's this!" I said. "Everyone acts as though we never did any lessons before in our lives!"

"I didn't mean you, I meant Shishkin," said Vasya.

"What about Shishkin? Hasn't he ever done his lessons? It's only his Russian that's bad, his marks in other subjects are all right."

"Keep your hair on. No offence meant. I didn't think he'd be doing his lessons, and when I saw he was, the words just popped out of my mouth."

"Well, you think before you pop, next time."

"You needn't get huffy about it."

The door opened again and Alik Sorokin came in.

"I know what he's going to say," whispered Shishkin. "You watch!"

"Doing your lessons, eh?" Alik Sorokin said with a smile.

We all burst out laughing.

"What's the joke?" Alik said, looking peeved.

"Nothing. We aren't laughing at you," I said. "What did you come for?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd drop over in case my help was needed."

"You didn't bring your chess-board with you by any chance?" I remarked.

"No, I forgot! Too bad! We could have had a nice game!"

"You'd better keep away from here with your chess," said Yura. "All right, fellows, let's be going. We're only in the way."

The boys went away.

"They came to check us," said Kostya. "They wanted to see whether we were really studying."

"What about it?" I said. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"I didn't say there was, did I? I think it's nice of them to show so much interest."

"Did Olga Nikolayevna tell your mother you hadn't been to school?" I asked Kostya.

"Yes. And Aunt Zina, too. You ought to have heard the jawing I got for that! I'll remember it as long as I live. But never mind. Thank goodness it's all over. I didn't enjoy playing truant one bit. It was awful, Vitya. You can't imagine how I envied all of you for being able

to go to school instead of having to slink about town like me. I felt like a homeless pup with no place to go. And I was so sorry for my poor mother! Do you think I liked deceiving her? But once I'd started I couldn't stop. Other mothers are proud of their sons, but how could Mother be proud of a good-for-nothing like me? And the worst of it was there didn't seem any way out. I just went from bad to worse. Oh, it was beastly."

"I didn't notice you suffering so much," I said.

"Oh, but I did! I just didn't show it. I pretended I didn't care, but my heart felt like a lump of lead all the time."

"Why did you pretend you didn't care?"

"I don't know. You'd come and scold me and I'd feel ashamed of myself, even if I did pretend everything was fine. Well, now it's all over, and it'll never happen again. I feel as if a terrific storm had passed over and now everything is calm and quiet again. All I have to do now is try to study harder."

"That's right, you try!" I said.
"I will. Haven't I started already?"

Chapter Eighteen



THE NEXT day Olga Nikolayevna looked over Kostya's homework and found mistakes even I hadn't noticed. He had got the grammar rules right because I had watched him, but he had made a lot of spelling mistakes in the copying. He'd left out letters, or stuck in the wrong letters. "It's sheer carelessness," said Olga Nikolayevna. "And that only shows that you

don't try hard enough. You are always in too great a hurry to get through with your lessons."

"I don't really hurry very much," said Kostya. "Then why is your writing so poor? Look how crooked your letters are. They're dancing a jig. You could write much better if you tried. A diligent pupil takes care not only to have no mistakes in his exercises but to write them neatly. You must admit, Shishkin, that you don't take enough pains yet with your work."

"I try to, Olga Nikolayevna, but you see I simply can't make myself sit over my lessons long enough. I keep wanting to get them done as quickly as possible. I don't know why!"

"I'll tell you why. It's because you haven't learned that nothing can be achieved without taking pains. If you don't take pains with your work you will never have a strong will and you won't succeed in anything," said Olga Nikolayevna.

From that day on you could tell by just looking at Kostya's exercise book how hard he was trying to get the better of that weak will of his. Sometimes the exercise began with nice even handwriting which showed that when he sat down to do his lessons he had made up his mind to do a good job of it. But gradually he let go of himself and the letters began dancing about, crawling one on top of the other or lurching from side to side as if they were drunk. Sometimes it was just the other way. The exercise would begin with an untidy scrawl; you could tell that Kostya wanted to get the nasty business over as quick as possible. But after a few lines his will-power began to work; the letters got straighter and neater and by the time you read to the end, you would never believe the first part had been written by the same person.

But handwriting wasn't the main trouble. The worst thing was his spelling. He still made heaps of mistakes, and the next time we had dictation, he got 2. All the boys had hoped he

would get 3 this time because they all knew he had decided to turn over a new leaf. So everyone was terribly disappointed.

"Listen, Vitya, aren't you supposed to be working with Kostya?" Yura tackled me during the break.

"Yes I am," I said. "We work very well together." "Then why hasn't he improved?" ′ "That's not my fault. I work with him every day." "Yes, but why isn't he making any progress?" "How should I know? Perhaps it's too soon yet." "You've had two whole weeks. You simply don't know how to make him work properly. We'll have to get someone else to help him. We'll ask Olga Nikolayevna to assign Vanya Pakhomov to him instead of you. He'll make Shishkin work."

"No, thanks!" I said. "Igor Alexandrovich himself gave me the assignment. You haven't the right to take me off!"

"We'll see about that. Tomorrow we'll have a talk with Olga Nikolayevna. You think just

because Igor Alexandrovich gave you the assignment you can do what you like?"

"You'd better give in, Maleyev," said Lenya Astafyev. "Olga Nikolayevna will take you off anyway. Anyone can see you're not fit for the job. Vanya will do better than you."

"You bet he will," said Yura.

"That remains to be seen," I said.

"What are you arguing about? You see yourself you're not getting any results."

Some other boys chimed in and told me I ought to give it up, but I wouldn't hear of it.

"Let Olga Nikolayevna take me off if she wants to but I'm not going to give it up myself."

"All right, Olga Nikolayevna will make you. And that'll be worse for you," said the boys.

I don't know what made me so stubborn. I knew I ought not to insist after Shishkin had gone and got 2 for dictation. Perhaps he really might have got a better mark if someone else had been coaching him. Well, it couldn't be helped now.

That day Shishkin and I felt pretty rotten.

"This is probably the last time we'll be studying together. Olga Nikolayevna will get someone to take my place tomorrow most likely," I said when I came to his house after school.

"Maybe she won't," said Kostya.

"I'm afraid she will. I'm not much good. I suppose I don't know how to teach. Only I'm sorry, because Igor Alexandrovich won't be pleased. I promised him I'd help you to get better marks and look what happened. He said it was a Pioneer task. I've gone and made a mess of it, and now no one will trust me with anything any more."

"But perhaps it isn't your fault at all? Perhaps I'm to blame," said Kostya. "I ought to have worked harder myself. Look, I'll tell you a secret. It is my fault. I am always in a hurry to get finished, and that's why I make so many mistakes. If I didn't rush like that, I could learn more."

"What's your hurry?"

"It's a secret, but I'll tell you. I wanted to get finished quick so I could train Lobzik."

"Well, and did you?"

"Uh-huh."

"So that accounts for your sloppy handwriting! Instead of paying attention to your work you were thinking of Lobzik all the time!"

"I suppose so. I thought of both really. And perhaps that's why I didn't do so well."

"That's what you get for trying to chase after two hares at once. You ought to concentrate on one hare at a time."

"Well, I caught one hare anyway."

"Which one?"

"I've taught Lobzik. Wait a minute and I'll show you. Lobzik, come here!"

Lobzik ran over to him. Kostya showed him a bit of cardboard with the figure "3" on it. Lobzik barked three times.

"Now this one!"

Kostya showed him "5." Lobzik barked five times.

"See? I snap my fingers on the quiet and he knows when to stop barking."

"How did you manage to teach him?" I asked.

"It wasn't easy, I can tell you. At first he wouldn't understand the signal for anything. Then I tried this: as soon as he barked the right number of times I'd throw him a lump of sugar or a bit of sausage or something and snap my fingers at the same time. He'd make a dive for the food and stop barking. I kept that up for days, and then one day I tried snapping my fingers without throwing him anything. At last I got him to stop barking that way because by now he was used to getting some titbit whenever he heard me snap my fingers. As soon as he heard the snap, he'd stop barking. At first I had to snap them loud, but now he's learned to catch the faintest click."

"So instead of learning yourself you taught your dog!" "Yes," he said. "I always do everything upside down, don't I? It's all because I have no will-power, I suppose. But

now I've taught him, I can settle down and study properly. There's nothing to stop me now. You'll see!"

"Not me," I said. "Now it's Vanya who'll see." The next day Kostya collected all the exercises Olga Nikolayevna had given him to do at home, his rough work and his finished work, and took them with him to school.

"Look, Olga Nikolayevna," he said, showing her the copy-books. "These are all the exercises you gave me to do. Here are the good ones, and here are the bad ones. You can see by the books how many times Vitya made me do the bad ones over again. Would you say he didn't work hard enough with me?"

"I'm sure that Vitya has been doing his best," said Olga Nikolayevna. "But no one can help you if you won't help yourself. You must be more serious about it. Vitya can't learn for you. You have to learn for yourself."

"I will, Olga Nikolayevna, I promise faithfully. Only please let Vitya continue helping me. He's spent so much time with me."

"Very well, we'll let him continue. I see that he has been doing a conscientious job. The winter holidays will be here soon. I shall give you some exercises to do during the holidays, and I'll show Vitya how to get better results with his coaching."

We were awfully glad that Olga Nikolayevna agreed to let me continue working with Kostya.

"Olga Nikolayevna," Kostya said. "We have a dog who can do tricks. His name is Lobzik. Will you let us perform with him at the New Year's party?"

"What does your dog do?"

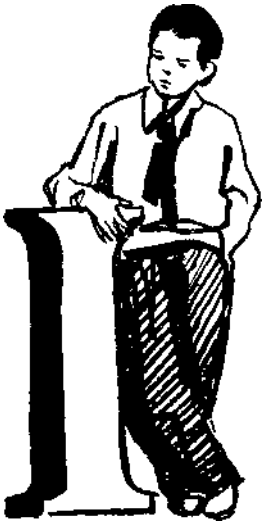
"He can do arithmetic. He can count like that dog we saw in the circus."

"Indeed! And who taught him?"

"We did."

"Very well. You shall bring your dog to the New Year's party. I am sure the boys would like to see a clever dog like that!"

Chapter Nineteen



DIDN'T like the idea of Kostya having taught Lobzik to count without me, because I had wanted to help teach him too. But now of course it was too late.

"Don't worry," said Kostya. "I'm bound to meet another homeless dog on the street some day, and I'll give it to you to train yourself." "I don't want to train a dog by myself," I said. "I like to do things together. It's more fun that way."

"But I'd help you. We would train it together, and then you would have a trained dog too."

"No," I said. "It's no good. As soon as you get your hands on a new dog, you'll begin training it and forget all about your lessons. Let's put it off till the summer."

"All right, let's put it off. And we'll tell the fellows that we both trained Lobzik. After all, we began training him together. And we'll

perform together with him at the New Year's party."

"What if he gets stage-fright?" I said. "We'll have to train him first not to be afraid of people." "How can we do that?"

"We ought to take him to some place where there are more people. Let's take him over to my place after we've done our lessons. We'll show him off to my folks."

When we finished our lessons, Kostya put Lobzik's collar and leash on, and we went over to my place. Aunt Nadya and Uncle Seryozha happened to be visiting us that day.

"Now we're going to show you a dog who can count," I said. "You must all pretend you are at the theatre and watch carefully."

We put Lobzik on a stool. Kostya took his strips of cardboard with figures out of his pocket and started the act. Lobzik gave all the right answers. Then I had a wonderful idea. Instead of showing Lobzik the figures I said: "Now, Lobzik, what is two times two?"

Lobzik barked four times. Of course I snapped my fingers at the right moment.

Lika was delighted: "Look at that! He can multiply too!"

Everyone praised us for having trained Lobzik so well, and we told them that we were going to perform with him at our school New Year's party.

"Have you got costumes for your act?" Lika asked.

"What do we need costumes for?" I said.

"It will be dull without costumes," said Lika. "I'll make you those funny tall hats that circus clowns wear."

"What will you make them out of?"

"I have some coloured paper. I bought it for the New Year tree."

"All right," I said. "It will be better with hats, I suppose."

"Can't you make one for Lobzik as well?" asked Kostya.

"No, Lobzik would look awfully funny in a clown's hat. I'll make a collar for him out of tinfoil."

"All right," I said.

"Now let's go to Gleb Skameikin's and show him what Lobzik can do," Kostya suggested.

We went to Gleb, and from Gleb's we went to Yura's, and from there to Tolya's. We showed off Lobzik everywhere, and he got all sorts of wonderful titbits in reward. We wound up at Vanya Pakhbmov's. Vanya's parents had company that evening. We were delighted. We would have a real rehearsal! But the whole thing was a terrible flop. Lobzik didn't give a single correct answer! He got everything mixed up and finally he stopped barking altogether. We were so ashamed we didn't know where to look. What a disgrace, especially after the way we had boasted about our wonderful dog with the mathematical mind!

"What do you think happened to him?" said Kostya when we were outside.

He threw Lobzik a piece of sugar, but Lobzik spat it out. "That's what it is," I said. "He's had too much to eat, that's why he doesn't bother to answer properly."

"Suppose he does the same thing at the school party?" said Kostya. "He'll disgrace us in front of the whole school. Perhaps we'd better call it off!"

"Nothing of the kind," I said. "It's too late to call it off now. We said we would do it, so we've got to go through with it."

The whole day before the party Kostya was in a state of nerves. He couldn't sit still and he wouldn't give Lobzik any peace.

"Leave him alone," I said. "You'll get him so tired that by the evening he won't want to bark at all."

"All right, I won't bother him any more. Go and have a rest, Lobzik."

We left Lobzik and went off to prepare for the performance. Lika had made us two hats: mine was blue with little silver stars, and Kostya's was green with golden stars. She had

made us silver collars and gold cuffs besides. We tried them on and were very pleased with them. We looked exactly like real circus performers. There was a silver collar for Lobzik too.

At last it was time to go to school. While the first half of the concert was going on, we sat in the hall with Lobzik to get him used to the audience. Then we went behind to wait our turn and watch all the other turns. We put on our costumes and fitted Lobzik's collar round his neck. Then the curtain rose and everyone saw Kostya and me in our shiny hats walking on to the stage. Kostya went ahead with Lobzik on the leash, and I followed with the attache case where we kept the things we needed for the performance. Kostya put Lobzik on a stool in the middle of the stage, and turned to the audience.

"Good evening, everybody!" he said. "It gives us great pleasure to introduce Lobzik, the dog with the mathematical mind. So far he has only learned to count up to ten, but he is still

in training and next time he will do better still. We ask everybody to sit very quiet because this is Lobzik's first public appearance and he might get stage-fright if it's noisy."

Kostya was obviously very nervous himself, because his voice shook -when he spoke. I was a bit nervous too. In fact, if I had had to speak, I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to say a word.

"And now we shall begin," said Kostya.

I took out three blocks of wood and laid them side by side on the table in front of Lobzik so that everyone could see them.

"Now Lobzik will tell us how many blocks of wood there are on the table," Kostya announced. "Lobzik, count!"

Lobzik barked three times.

The boys clapped loudly and shouted with excitement, and Lobzik got so scared he jumped off the stool and tried to run away. But Kostya caught him, shoved a bit of sugar into his mouth and put him back on the stool. While Lobzik was crunching the sugar, the hall

quieted down. I got another block of wood out of the case and put it alongside the three.

"How many blocks are there now?" Kostya asked. Lobzik barked four times.

Again the boys applauded, and again Lobzik tried to run away, but Kostya caught him in time and stuck another bit of sugar in his mouth.

I put three more blocks of wood on the table and Lobzik barked seven times.

Then I took a piece of cardboard with the figure "2" on it and showed it to the audience.

"What figure is that?" Kostya asked Lobzik.

Lobzik barked twice.

We showed Lobzik all kinds of figures and he gave all the right answers.

Then Kostya said: "Now tell us, what is two times two?. . . Twice three?. . . Three plus four?"

Lobzik barked correctly each time. The audience went on clapping, but by now Lobzik was used to it and wasn't scared any more. I wasn't scared any more either. I told the boys

that our Lobzik could do arithmetic problems as well, and I invited them to give him any problem, with figures up to ten.

A boy in the front row got up and gave Lobzik this problem to solve: "A bottle with the cork cost ten kopeks. The bottle cost eight kopeks more than the cork. How much each did the bottle and the cork cost?"

"Now then, Lobzik," I said. "Put on your thinking cap and give us the answer."

But, of course, it was me who had to do the thinking. I tackled the problem in my head: two kopeks for the cork, eight kopeks for the bottle. Ten kopeks for both!

"All right, Lobzik, how much did the cork cost?"

Lobzik barked twice. "And the bottle?"

Lobzik barked eight times.

You ought to have heard what a row they made!

"Wrong answer!" they shouted. "The dog has made a mistake!"

"What mistake?" I said. "If the bottle and the cork together cost ten, that means the bottle cost eight and the cork two."

"But the problem says the bottle cost eight kopeks more than the cork. If the cork cost two kopeks, the bottle ought to cost ten, but they cost ten kopeks together," the boys explained.

I realized I had slipped up.

"You hear that, Lobzik? You've made a mistake," I said. "Now think again and give us the right answer."

But of course Lobzik just sat there looking bright while I had to rack my poor brains.

"Just a minute," I said to the boys, "give him a chance to work it out."

"That's right," shouted the boys. "Don't hurry him. It's a bit hard for a dog."

I stood there trying desperately to do the sum in my head. "If the bottle costs eight kopeks more than the cork, that means the cork costs two kopeks and the bottle ten. But in that case they would cost twelve kopeks together, and the problem says they cost ten. If

the cork costs two kopeks and the bottle eight, the bottle is only six kopeks dearer." What was wrong with me? I was going round in circles!

"Give him a couple more minutes," I said to the audience. "He'll soon have the right answer."

"Give him as long as he likes," they shouted back. "He's only a dog. Can't expect him to do a sum like that right off the bat."

"Can't expect anybody to do the blinking thing," I thought, and started racking my brains again.

"Listen, you dunce," Kostya hissed. "The cork costs one kopek, not two!"

Now I saw what was wrong! Of course the cork costs one kopek, and the bottle eight kopeks more, that makes nine, and together they cost ten.

"He's got it!" I shouted. "Attention. Lobzik is ready to give you the answer."

The boys quieted down.

"Now, Lobzik, how much does the cork cost?"

Lobzik barked once.

"Hurrah!" shouted the boys.

"Hush!" I said. "That's not the whole problem yet. Let him tell us how much the bottle costs."

Lobzik barked nine times.

That brought the house down! The boys clapped and shouted and stamped their feet with joy.

"Wonderful dog!" they said. "He made a mistake, but he gave the correct answer in the end."

Thus ended Lobzik's first public appearance.

Chapter Twenty



AND so the New Year came and the winter holidays began. There were beautiful New Year trees in every house, and everyone was in a merry mood. Kostya and I were in a holiday

mood too, but we had firmly resolved to spend part of our free time studying. Olga Nikolayevna had given us our special task, and Kostya was so anxious to study that he was ready to spend all day at it. But I decided that it would be quite enough if we worked two hours a day and 'spent the rest of the time playing or reading books. So we worked together every day, and Kostya began to show signs of improving.

Soon after the holidays ended, we had dictation and Kostya got 3. He was so happy you'd think it was 5 plus.

"What are you so excited about?" I said to him. "Three isn't such a wonderful mark."

"I know, but it's good enough for me right now. I haven't had 3 for Russian for ages. But I'm not going to stop at that. You'll see, next time I'll get 4, and then the 5's will come rolling in."

"Fine!" Yura said. "But in the meantime you concentrate on that 4 and then we won't have a

single 3 in the class. All the other boys are getting 4's and 5's only."

"Don't worry," answered Kostya. "Everything will be all right. The class won't have to blush for me any more. Now I know that we all have to fight for the honour of our class. I haven't got far to go to catch up."

Olga Nikolayevna, too, was glad that Shishkin had begun to improve.

"It's time you two were doing some communal work," she said to us one day. "All the others have some useful task, but you two have nothing."

"We're willing," said I.

"Yes, we're willing," echoed Kostya. "I've been wanting to work on the wall newspaper for a long time. But no one elects me to the editorial board."

"That's right," I said. "Let them elect us to the editorial board."

"No, it's too soon for that. Only the best pupils can work on the wall newspaper," said Olga Nikolayevna.

"That's all right, we'll take any kind of work," said Kostya. "We can take the Health Committee if you like. I was in the Health Committee once when I was in the Second. I had lots of fun ordering everybody to wash their hands and keep their ears clean." '

"We have a Health Committee already. But I have an interesting task for you. We want to organize a class library. You can be in charge of it if you like."

"Where shall we get the books from?" I asked.

"From the school library. I will get you a bookcase for them."

"I'm game," said Kostya. "I like reading books."

"Me, too," I said.

"That's fine. You must try to be good librarians. That means taking good care of the books and seeing that the boys do the same."

We went to Sofia Ivanovna, the school librarian, and told her that we were the

Fourth-class librarians and asked for some books.

"Very well," said Sofia Ivanovna. "I have some books for the fourth year. Will you take them now?"

She gave us a whole pile of books, and we carried them to the class-room in several trips. There were about a hundred of them, but when we put them all on the shelves, they didn't look so many because they only took up three shelves, and the other shelves were empty.

"Perhaps we ought to bring some books from home to fill it up?" said Kostya. "I could bring five or six."

"So could I," I said, "but that won't be enough to fill three shelves."

"Suppose we ask the fellows? They may have some old books lying around the house. Let's ask them to bring them in."

We told Olga Nikolayevna about our plan for filling up the shelves.

"Very well, tell the boys. They may be able to help you," she said.

Next day we announced to the class that we were going to have our own library. There weren't very many books yet, we said, and so if anyone had books at home which he had read would he please donate them to the library. The boys promised, and soon the books began coming in. Some brought one, some two, and others more. We soon had the bookcase filled up. We wanted to start giving them out at once, but Olga Nikolayevna said we must first make a catalogue. We got ourselves a thick note-book and wrote down the titles of all the books and gave each book a number. Now if we wanted to find a book, we didn't need to hunt on all the shelves, we had only to look in our note-book.

Kostya was very pleased that we had such order in our library. He specially liked to see the shelves all full of books.

"Now it is just perfect," he said. "All packed tight and no empty spaces."

He kept opening the door to admire the books. Some of them were quite old and shabby, with battered covers and loose pages. We decided to take the shabby books home and mend them. And so after we had done our lessons at Kostya's, we went over to my place because I had some glue at home and got to work on the books. When Lika saw what we were doing, she offered to help.

The bindings gave us the most trouble. Kostya grumbled all the time.

"Look at that!" he would say. "I don't know what those fellows do with their books. Looks as if they banged each other over the head with them."

"Oh, surely they wouldn't do that," said Lika.

"Then why do all the covers come off? If you sit quietly and read a book would the cover come off?"

"I don't suppose it would."

"Well, that's what I mean. Now look at this! A whole page torn loose. Why? Because

someone must have pulled at the page instead of reading. I'd like to pull his hair for spoiling books like that. Now the page will fall out and get lost. Is that the way to treat books?"

"Certainly not," we agreed.

"And what do you say to this?" he went on, getting angrier all the time. "Someone's gone and drawn a dog with six legs in the margin. Is that right?"

"Of course it isn't," said Lika. "Whoever saw a dog with six legs!"

"That isn't what I meant, silly! I meant, is it right to draw dogs in books?"

"Oh, no!" Lika agreed.

"Of course, it isn't! Four legs or six legs, it makes no difference—for the book, I mean, not for the dog. Anyhow it's wrong to draw things in books—dogs, horses or anything else. If everybody went and scrawled and scribbled all over books there'd be nothing left to read."

He took an india-rubber and began rubbing out the dog. A few minutes later he let out another yell:

"Look! Someone's drawn a face, and in ink too!"

He tried to rub out the face, but the ink had soaked into the paper and he ended up by rubbing a hole in the page.

"If I only knew who did that!" he said, raging. "I'd show him. I'd bang him on the head with the book."

"But you just said you mustn't use books to bang people on the head with," said Lika. "It's bad for the covers."

Kostya examined the book critically.

"That's all right," he said, "this book would stand it. The cover's nice and strong."

"Well," I said, "if all librarians started banging their readers over their heads with books, there'd never be enough covers."

"How are you going to teach them to take proper care of books?" said Kostya. "I'm not going to let them ruin state property."

"We shall have to tell them to be more careful," I said.

"Why don't you put up a sign?" suggested Lika.

"That's what I call a practical suggestion," cried Kostya. "But what shall we write?"

"Take care of books. They aren't made of iron," Lika proposed.

"Where did you ever see a sign like that?" I asked her.



"Nowhere," she said. "I made it up myself."

"Well, it isn't very clever," I said. "Everyone knows books are not made of iron."

"What about this for a sign: 'Cherish your books like that apple of your eye'? Pretty good, don't you think?" Kostya proposed.

"No," I said. "Too fancy for my liking. What've apples got to do with it anyway?"

"All right, what about this one: 'Take care of books; they cost money'?" Kostya suggested.

"No good, either," I said. "Some books hardly cost anything, but that doesn't mean you can tear them."

"Let's say this: 'Books are your friends. Take good care of them,'" said Lika.

"I think that will do. Books are our friends because they teach us to be good. That means we must treat them as friends."

We thought it over and decided it would do. Then we got some paper and paints and drew our sign.

The next day we hung up the sign on the wall next to the bookcase and started to give out books.

Every time he gave someone a book Kostya said:

"Now, don't you go drawing dogs, devils or funny faces in it, mind."

"What would I do that for?"

"I don't know, but it's my business to warn you. This book is common property now. You can do what you like to your own books, although it's a shame to mess up any book because your little brother or sister can read it after you. But see you take care of library books, or I'll give you what for. I'm warning you." "All right, warn away."

But Kostya wasn't content with that. Every boy who borrowed a book from our library had to listen to a lecture from him on how to take care of books, and why.

After lessons that day I found him sitting by the bookcase staring at the empty spaces on the shelves and looking very glum.

"All those books gone!" he said. "It was so nice before with all the shelves full up, and now we might as well go out and look for more books."

"What's the trouble?" I said. "The fellows will read them and bring them back."

"Yes, but then they'll take others in exchange. We'll never have a full shelf again."

"But what do you want full shelves for? Books are made to be read, not to stand on shelves."

I myself took a book to read at home.

"What, you too?" said Kostya reproachfully. "There are hardly any left as it is."

"But I'll read it quickly and bring it back," I assured him.

After that he took a book himself.

"I suppose one book more or less doesn't matter," he consoled himself.

Now that we had charge of the library, Kostya and I began reading quite a lot. Kostya got so interested in his books that he even read in the street. One day he went right smack into a lamp-post and got a nice lump on his forehead. After that he did his reading at home.

He took his library work very seriously. Even his character changed. He became very neat, much more "organized" and not half as absent-minded as before. And he was very strict with the boys. If anyone came for a book

with dirty hands, he would start nagging him. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. What have you been doing with your hands?"

"I dunno. It's none of your business anyway."

"Oh, isn't it! You've come for a book, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I'm going to give a book to anyone with hands like that? You'll muck it all up."

"I'll wash my hands when I get home."

"Nothing doing. You go to the wash-room and clean yourself up and then you'll get a book. And next time you come for a book see that your hands are clean."

Kostya didn't like it when anyone kept library books too long.

"What are you holding on to that book so long for? Don't you think anyone else wants to read it? If you don't want to read it, bring it back and give someone else a chance."

"I haven't finished it yet. I'll bring it back when I finish it."

"How many years do you need to finish it?"

"Who said years? I'm allowed ten days, aren't I?"

"Yes, but when did you take it out?"

"A week ago. My ten days aren't up yet."

"You shouldn't need ten days to read a book like that. Besides, ten days is the limit. You're not obliged to keep it that long, you can bring it back sooner, you know."

"But I'm telling you I haven't finished it yet."

"Well, for goodness' sake hurry up!"

Kostya even lectured those who brought their books back too soon.

"Fast reader, aren't you?" he'd say. "You only took it out yesterday. I don't believe you read it at all."

"What did I take it for, then?"

"How do I know? Maybe you took it to look at the pictures?"

"Am I a baby, or what?"

"All right, let's hear what the book is about."

"What's this, an exam?"

"I have to know whether you read the book or not."

"It's none of your business. Your job's to hand out books, not to check your readers."

"That's where you're wrong. It's the librarian's job to see that books are read. What's the use of giving you books if you don't read them? Let someone else read them."

And he wouldn't let the fellow go until he had heard from him what the book was about.

It was Kostya's idea to get the boys to write short reviews of the books.

"All you fellows do is read," he said. "It wouldn't occur to any of you to write a review."

"What do you want a review for?"

"We could run it in the wall newspaper. If the book is good, other boys will get interested and want to read it. I'm not going to give you any more books until you write a review."

That's how the boys began to write short reviews of the books they read. They wrote so many that there was no room for them all in

the wall newspaper. So we had to start a newspaper of our own. We called it *Young Reader* and published all the reviews the boys wrote, and since they tried to make their reviews as interesting as they could, it was a very good paper and everybody liked it.

Chapter Twenty-One



VER SINCE Kostya had improved his Russian, and especially after he and I became

librarians, our prestige in class went up. Kostya was allowed to play in the basket-ball team, and he turned out to be a first-class player. In fact we made him captain. He trained his team so well that we won the school championship, and that sent our prestige up still higher and there was an article about our team in the school wall newspaper.

But we weren't altogether out of the woods yet. No matter how hard we worked together at his Russian, Kostya couldn't improve on that 3. He had been so sure he would get 4 soon after 3, and then 5, but he was sadly mistaken. Olga Nikolayevna continued to give him 3's until Kostya finally began to despair.

"You see how it is," he said to Volodya. "I can't possibly go on getting 3's any more. I'm the class librarian and captain of the basketball team. There was a piece about me in the school newspaper. How can I go about with 3 for Russian?"

"Have a little more patience," said Volodya. "Don't give up trying."

"I wasn't going to give up trying. But I'm afraid Olga Nikolayevna is so used to giving me 3's she'll never give me a higher mark."

"You're wrong about that," said Volodya. "Olga Nikolayevna is very fair. As soon as you deserve it, you may be sure she will give it to you."

"Oh, I do wish that would be soon!" said Kostya. "I'm the only one with 3 in the whole class. If it wasn't for me, we'd all be getting good marks. I'm spoiling everything."

We decided to make another spurt. Olga Nikolayevna was coaching Kostya after school too, and he was slowly but surely making progress. And one day, about six weeks after he got 3 for dictation, he got his first 4. It was a red-letter day for the whole class.

We had a class meeting that day, and Olga Nikolayevna reported on progress.

"Now we have no more low marks in our class," she said. "We have got rid not only of 2's but of 3's as well."

She said that Kostya and I had worked very hard and now Kostya had improved so much that from now on he would make rapid progress.

"There are plenty of good classes in our school which have pupils who are getting high marks, but so far ours is the only class where everyone is getting only good or excellent marks," said Olga Nikolayevna. "I think that the other classes will soon follow our example. But you must not rest on your laurels, you know. You must continue to forge ahead. If you don't go on working at your studies, you will find yourselves left behind."

Then Volodya, the Pioneer Leader, took the floor.

"I am writing an article about your class for the school wall newspaper. I think the whole school ought to know how you have been working so that other classes can follow your

example. You must tell them how you managed to get such good results."

"I think it is because Olga Nikolayevna is such a good teacher," said Vanya Pakhomov.

"Yes, that's it, of course," Vasya Yerokhin supported him. "Everything does not depend on the teacher," said Olga Nikolayevna. "Good teachers can have classes with both good and bad pupils."

"I think another reason is that we all wanted to work well," said Tolya Dyozhkin.

"Now, can anyone tell me why you all wanted to?" Volodya asked.

Kostya raised his hand. "I think it's because we are all such good friends in our class. Because each of us thinks not only of himself but of his classmates as well. I know how it was with me. When I was behind with my studies, all the boys in the class worried about me. Only I was still a dummy then, and I didn't appreciate it. Now I see that they wanted to help me. They were fighting for the honour of the class."

"You're quite right, Kostya. It's friendship that has helped your class to make good," said Volodya. "We have all learned that real friendship doesn't mean overlooking weakness in a comrade. It means making him give the best he has in him."

"May I have the floor?" I spoke up. "I know what real friendship means now. If you see your friend is doing wrong, you must stop him, you oughtn't to be afraid to tell him, because that would mean you aren't a real comrade. When Kostya stayed away from school, I helped him to keep his secret and that only did him harm. But I don't make allowances for him any more, and now I know I am a real friend to him."

"Quite right, Vitya," said Volodya.

We had a long talk, with everyone asking all sorts of questions, and then Kostya said:

"Olga Nikolayevna, do you mind putting that 4 in my report card?"

"At the end of the week I shall mark all the cards and yours as well," said Olga Nikolayevna.

"Please, Olga Nikolayevna, do put mine in now," he begged.

"Why are you in such a hurry? Your 4 won't run away."

"I know it won't. But you see I want to show it to Mother. I've been promising her I'll get 4 in Russian for such a long time that she's given up hope."

"But won't your Mother believe you if you just tell her?" Olga Nikolayevna asked him.

"She will, of course, but you know how it is. It's one thing when you tell someone, but when it's down there in your report card it makes all the difference."

The others backed him up and even Volodya put in a good word for him. "Just mark his card, Olga Nikolayevna," he urged. "The others will wait until the end of the week."

Olga Nikolayevna smiled. "Very well, since you all speak up for him, I can't refuse." And she wrote a 4 in Kostya's card.

When Kostya and I came out on to the street, I noticed that while we had been in school it had turned much warmer outside. It had been still quite cold in the morning but now the icicles hanging from the roofs were dripping and sparkling in the sun like the decorations on a New Year tree. The wind blew in our faces—a warm, gentle sort of wind that smelt like a river on a summer day. It seemed to have come to us straight from the south, from somewhere in the Kazakhstan steppelands where it was already spring and the sowing season had begun. I felt so happy that my heart seemed to swell inside my chest and I seemed to be walking on air. All sorts of wonderful thoughts came into my head. I wanted to do some tremendous feat so that everyone should marvel at me and feel as wonderful as I did.

And while I was thinking these marvellous thoughts, Kostya walked along beside me and didn't notice anything. Then he stopped, took his report card out of his satchel and stood admiring his 4.

"Isn't it a beauty!" he said, grinning from ear to ear. "How I dreamed of that 4. How many times I've said to myself: I'll get 4 and tell Mother, and she will be pleased with me. I know I'm not going to school just for Mother's sake, she's always reminding me of that. But just the same I am doing it a little bit for her sake. After all, she wants her son to be a good man. I will be something, you'll see, and Mother will be proud of me one day. I'll work just a wee bit harder, and before you know it I'll have 5. Then Mother can be proud. Aunt Zina will be proud too, but I don't mind that. After all, Aunt Zina isn't so bad even if she does scold me now and again."

He stopped, put his report card back in his satchel and looked about him. Then he took a deep breath and said:

"Smell that wind? It's spring, Vitya, spring. Just imagine! It's already the end of February, and February is the last winter month. Soon it will be March, and the streams will start running again, and the grass will be green, and the hedgehogs and all the other beasties in the woods will wake up, and the birds will sing, and the flower? bloom. . . ."

He went on talking about spring and the birds, but I don't remember everything he said because just then I got the idea of writing about all that had happened to us. I started the same day and continued nearly every day after that until school ended. And although I haven't written about everything, I have tried to put down what was most important. And the important thing is that Kostya and I finished the Fourth with the highest marks—5's in all subjects.

That's all.



N. NOSOV



SCHOOLBOYS